

# Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Exams 2021](#), HC 1068

Tuesday 8 December 2020

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1 - 133

## Witnesses

**I:** Dame Glenys Stacey, Acting Chief Regulator, Ofqual.

**II:** Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards, Department for Education.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## Examination of Witness

Witness: Dame Glenys Stacey.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Good morning to Dame Glenys, chief regulator. For the benefit of the tape, could you introduce yourself and your responsibility, please?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** My name is Dame Glenys Stacey, and I am the acting chief regulator at Ofqual, the exams regulator, until the end of this calendar year.

Q2 **Chair:** We know that grade inflation was high in 2020, and you have mentioned this yourself in your documents. The proportion of year 11 pupils who were awarded GCSE grade 4 and above in English language rose by around 9.7 percentage points. The proportion of A-level grade A or A\* increased by 12.9 percentage points, and as much as 16.9 percentage points in further maths, 18.5 percentage points in computing and 22.3 percentage points in music.

Neil Sheldon, a former examiner, a fellow of the Royal Statistical Society and, as I understand it, a member of Ofqual's expert advisory group advising on exams during the pandemic has warned that just bumping everyone up by half a grade does not achieve anything; it does not do anything for relative disadvantage. He said that the Department for Education's approach "defies rational analysis" and is ignoring the real problem, which is of course the quality and quantity of teaching across schools and regions and in terms of the personal circumstances of the students.

Do you agree that raising the inflationary tide to lift all boats will do nothing to change the relative gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers? If I can mix my metaphors, in essence all you are doing is moving the goalposts.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** There is a lot in that, so I will give a summary answer and then we can come back to the specifics. I would say that, on standards for 2021, there is no right answer. We are in a pandemic and it has just had a desperately dispiriting and continuing effect on education. I really do understand that, and I understand that, for all students, their teachers and parents, it has been enormously difficult. In fact, I have said publicly about the baleful effect of this pandemic on all students.

When it comes to inflation, when I was first chief regulator back in 2011 we were experiencing a creeping, unacknowledged grade inflation at that time. It is making it really difficult to compare results. We know from research that we did at the time that it did not command public confidence, and that it undermined the value of those qualifications. We worked in a determined fashion to get a grip on that over several years. This is different. Having seen the outcomes of summer 2020 and then spoken and listened very carefully to a very good number of students, teachers, parents, academics, school leaders, unions and the wider



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public, there is virtually no support at all for returning to established standards in the year ahead. It was thought almost universally to be quite simply unfair, and we agree with that.

It is unconscionable for us to try to row back to 2019 as if the pandemic had never happened. Instead, we have a pandemic cohort that started in summer 2020. It will last beyond 2021 with the first outcomes in summer 2020, and we are now in that period. While that pandemic washes through the system, we have to recognise that and set standards differently, and that is the decision that we came to.

**Q3 Chair:** Can I come back on that? We know that inflation in 2020 was never intended, the figures that you set out, that I set out in the beginning. It was a very undeliberate result of a major error in the way that the 2020 grades were assessed. In fact, the Secretary of State and Ofqual introduced the dreaded algorithm in the first place, with the whole purpose of avoiding grade inflation.

The DfE gave Ofqual an official direction on 31 March to, “ensure, as far as possible, that qualification standards are maintained and the distribution of grades follows a similar profile to that in previous years”. Surely the answer to a cock up is not simply to recycle that cock up just to make it fair on this year’s cohort.

Of course, you could adjust for any drop in overall performance this year due to disruptions. You could do that by dropping grade boundaries or standardising grades, but why should you not peg those results to 2019 and a normal distribution of grades, or at least between 2019 and 2020 to start the transition back to normality?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** The point here is that we do not quite know when normality is going to be resumed. It is certainly not this year and probably not next year or 2022. We are in a different era, which is the way we are looking at it.

It is true to say that, as I said when speaking with a large number of people across the sector, and particularly parents and students, not everyone favours us pegging to 2020. There are a number of people who would prefer a halfway point, for example, or somewhere in between. I think the difficulty there is identifying that point and identifying it fairly, and then saying to the students this year—who frankly had disruption last year when their schools were shut and are continuing to have disruption now—that pegging it at 2019 or somewhere between 2019 and 2020 is fair to them compared to the experience of the first pandemic cohort would be difficult.

**Q4 Chair:** Why not peg it to 2019 and drop the grade boundaries in terms of standardising grades? You would still have fairness in the system. In essence, what you are doing is baking in grade hyperinflation—let alone grade inflation—for the years to come.



**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am not sure I accept that. There are two things in addition to pegging that are not unimportant here. One is that we will distribute the generosity evenly, because it fell unevenly by accident. That will mean that, for some subjects, they will not be as generous as 2020. Secondly, we will also not allow unconscionable or implausible grade boundaries because, obviously, a qualification and its grade must have demonstrable meaning. It must represent some understanding and knowledge of the subject, for example.

Although we are in broad terms pegging to 2020, results will be tempered to some extent by the fact that we will not allow implausible grade boundaries. I come back to the main point, Chairman. I think I have attended 74 events, and we have run a good number of focus groups on top of that. In all of this, we have had precious few people who have said that they would have any confidence in these results if they were pegged to 2019. Given the experience of summer 2020—

Q5 **Chair:** You mention the consultation. Sorry to interject. You mention the parent sample who said they preferred 2019, but you said it was a small sample. Why was it a small sample? Why did you not do a wide sample? Secondly, did you do a proper consultation with major employers—like the CBI, the IOD, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Manufacturers' Association—to see what they thought about baking grade hyperinflation into the system?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am happy to send you details of all the consultation meetings we have been in. It is true that we did not run a representative sample exercise for parents or students. We did not think that would be possible in the time available. We have spoken to the broadest range of people, including those in industry, and indeed I have spoken personally with the CBI.

Q6 **Chair:** What did the CBI say? Is that in your document?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** It is not in any documentation, but it was not at all unsupportive of the approach.

Q7 **Chair:** In your six-page summary of your decision, you say, "In reality, only a small proportion of English students compete for higher or further education places in Wales and Scotland, but a strong perception of unfairness would likely prevail. In our view, this approach would not command public confidence, or the confidence of Government or Parliament". I want to understand if you are making public policy decisions on the basis of what is happening in Scotland and Wales in terms of exams, rather than assessing the merits of the case in hand, particularly when your own assessment suggests only a small proportion of English students compete for higher or further education places in Wales or Scotland.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I do not have the exact figures to hand but I understand it will be about 10,000 students in that position. There are



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about 600,000 students taking their qualifications, but I will confirm that to you.

We have learned a good number of lessons from summer 2020. One of them is the fact that, although there may be a small proportion of students affected, it does not mean it is not at all relevant. We do need to take those students into account but it is also a question of public perception and public confidence. If parents and students in this country know there is a more generous approach across the border, they would find it difficult to accept a regulator who was trying not to recognise that.

In conclusion, I meet my fellow regulators weekly to discuss the positions in each of the jurisdictions. At the moment, Northern Ireland is still committed to examinations and is likely to set a standard in line with the one we have set out ourselves. It seems to me that is some comfort to parents and students.

**Q8 Chair:** How can you be confident that carrying forward the grade distribution from 2019, or adopting a position midway between 2019 and 2020, would not command public confidence? How thoroughly have you tested these propositions? You said that you had done the consultation in a relatively short time and had small sample groups, and that the parents particularly were anxious about this.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** As well as the focus groups that we have run, I think Ofqual and I have attended 74 other events where we had teachers, heads of school, union representatives representing school leaders and college representatives to talk these issues through. We have also spoken in those meetings with representatives from higher education and further education.

**Q9 Chair:** So not massively with business. You said you have had one conversation with the CBI, but not massively with employers.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I have personally had one conversation.

**Q10 Chair:** You did not do a consultation with employers to see what value they thought this would have?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We will have spoken with other employment groups. I am sorry, I do not have the details, but I can get them to you. From my own perspective I have spoken with the CBI.

**Q11 Chair:** What I am trying to understand is, with your consultation, did you consult thoroughly and properly with major employers' organisations in our country? Did Ofqual as a whole?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I have personally spoken with one of the biggest representative groups, CBI, and we will have spoken with others as well, but I would need to get those details to you. It is fair to say that we have done more consultation on this particular decision than we have ever done. It is an unprecedented amount, and the difference here, compared with how things have been at times in the past, is that this has been a



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very active engagement where we are listening, rather than the normal consultation where you are presenting a provisional view. We have been out there listening very carefully.

Q12 **Chair:** What would be quite interesting would be to see how thorough your engagement was with employers, if you could let us know, and what their views were about this.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Absolutely.

Q13 **Chair:** To go back to my opening question, I want to get a summary answer from you that, whatever decision has been made, raising the inflationary tide to lift all boats will do nothing to change the relative gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers. Do you accept that?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** My own view is that we have taken unprecedented steps this year, steps that would have been unthinkable in times gone by. It is not just about where we are setting a standard. It is also about putting back examinations by three weeks. It is the Government's decision, but we have to regulate for that.

Q14 **Chair:** I get all the measures. I want to be clear that, in a nutshell, raising the inflationary tide to lift all boats will do nothing to change the relative gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** The raising of the standard is designed to reflect the effect of the pandemic on all students, but I would argue that those students who are most disadvantaged will get most comfort from it. I would also argue that the adaptations we now expect to oversee on qualifications—particularly the advance notice of what may or may not be in the examination—is of benefit to all students but is of special benefit to those who are least prepared, those that are already disadvantaged.

Q15 **Chair:** It will not change the disadvantage gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers. Can I get you at least to acknowledge that, as one of your former chief examiners has said in a letter to the papers?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Forgive me, but qualifications and examinations are not able to close the disadvantage gap, per se. What we can do is recognise that the package of measures that we are now presenting for this year will be of more benefit to students who are less well prepared, and those are likely to be the more disadvantaged. If you are already very well educated, frankly, by the end of January or early February you should be very well prepared already. Those who are not, who are in a different position because of their socioeconomic background or poor teaching or whatever, will get much more out of this than those who are more fortunate.

Q16 **Chair:** Is there a risk that we could see higher dropout rates from universities because people have inflated grades relative to course demands?



**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Universities are already well skilled in differentiating between one student and another. They do not rely entirely on grades. There are a lot of other measures that they are taking into account. We have spoken with UCAS at length about that to make sure it is ready for this. UCAS normally takes students from across the globe with very different sorts of educational qualifications and is used to evaluating students in terms of their knowledge and putting the appropriate arrangements in place.

I do think there is an increased risk of dropout, but much of that will be because of the dire effects of the pandemic on student life.

Q17 **Jonathan Gullis:** I would quickly like to ask how you are going to ensure that marking is fair across all exam boards. Marking is a very subjective thing. To ensure that fairness and equality is spread across all exam boards in a shorter time period could potentially be an area that may worry parents. I do not want to see a massive amount of appeals that will overload the system.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We know that our marking in this country compares favourably with that internationally. We do not have a particularly low base to start with. We are in a decent position to start with. We have regulatory controls over marking. We overview it and exam boards themselves have very dynamic quality controls that you may be familiar with.

The issue here really is that, because the exam timetable has been put back, which is good, we have a more condensed period for marking. That means that exam boards are going to have to recruit extra markers to get the marking done in the time available. I appreciate that most markers are teachers, and of course they are already feeling dog-tired and may yearn for a rest and may not be that willing to put themselves out over the summer, yet teachers are the bulk of markers. I know it is going to be a really big ask this year, and the Government, Ofqual and the exam boards must take every step they can to make that possible.

Q18 **Christian Wakeford:** I have a couple of hopefully very quick questions. Dame Glenys, you said there is no uniform desire to return to standard and that you have consulted with students, young people, teachers and so on. Was there a regional variance? I imagine if you spoke to a young person from the south-east and a young person from the north-west, where I am from, there would probably be two very different answers.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We spoke to students in some of the northern schools. It was Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle and York, for example, and there was no noticeable difference. Indeed, of all the groups that we spoke with, students were the hardest on themselves wherever they were in the country.

Q19 **Christian Wakeford:** I welcome the steps that were announced last week, although I do not think they go far enough. Speaking to my youth



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cabinet recently, there are examples of children who have had to isolate six, seven or eight times. While this is a great relief for many students throughout the country, and one less thing to worry about, it does nothing to tackle the divide that is appearing between those who have had to isolate and those who have not. What further can be done to make sure there is a fairer and more level playing field for all children sitting exams?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I absolutely understand just how enormously difficult this has been for parents, children, teachers and school leaders. You are absolutely right, there are significant differences in the extent of school closures, lockdowns or being sent home across the country. Of course, the picture is changing and will continue to change, but it is dispiriting overall and unfair. There is no doubt at all that students in some parts of the country are being sent home more than others.

It is not straightforward to see how that is accommodated within an examination series. Within a particular area—Liverpool, for example—there will be students who are privately educated or in schools that are outstanding, and those schools may be very good indeed at providing good home learning, whereas other schools may be in the requires improvement category from Ofsted or may not be doing it well.

Of course, students have different home circumstances. We know that over the summer, for example, some 10% of students were paying for tutoring. They would be well-off parents, but there are well-off parents in all parts of the country. We cannot see how we can readily take into account these differences within an examination award, because they are at such an individual level. Instead, the qualification must represent a good assessment of knowledge and learning, but more must be done to recognise lost learning, and differential lost learning most certainly. We are willing to play our part in that. We are ready to advise Government and, indeed, welcome their lost learning working group.

**Chair:** Glenys, if I could ask you very gently to be as concise as you can. I know there is a lot to say. Thank you.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Okay.

Q20 **Ian Mearns:** How will the most disadvantaged pupils feel the most benefits from this strategy that you are using? If the whole market moves in one direction, how will the youngsters feel at the bottom of that market, in terms of the qualifications they have acquired for their next stage of progression? I do not understand how that works.

While I absolutely accept that the marking system in this country compares favourably, that there are regular controls at exam board level and that Ofqual is overseeing the whole process, we know from things that you have told us before that a quarter of all grades are probably inaccurate plus or minus one grade either way. That inaccuracy was built in before Covid, and I am surprised. If an awful lot more people realised that is what was happening, the whole system would be overburdened



with appeals based on the fact that probably 12.5% of youngsters are undergraded by a grade and 12.5% of youngsters are overgraded by a grade.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** There are two questions there. The first one is about disadvantage. Of course in any year there is disadvantage and examinations and qualifications. The best we hope for is that they do not further disadvantage. For example, we put a lot of effort into making sure that questions are not biased, and all the rest of it, so that we do not contribute to that disadvantage.

This year we are very certain that we are not doing that, not contributing to disadvantage, and may be redressing it to some extent. To give one small example, let's say in the science subjects or in maths, formula sheets are provided by exam boards in those subjects, that is a strong possibility. You need to know two things with a formula: you need to know the formula and you need to know how to use the formula. As I say, the brightest, the most well-off, the most well-supported student will already know the formula, but the disadvantaged student may not. It is a leg up, in a way.

Yes, you still have to know how to deploy it and those using the qualification will want to know that, but at least you have had that start. If you look at the range of things that are going to happen here—particularly the advance notice—again the disadvantaged student may not have been taught well across the range of the subject, but with notification in late January, early February, of what to focus on he or she then has four months to really do that. These changes can never redress disadvantage, as that is beyond qualifications, but they cannot get in the way and they can in some small measure help.

When it comes to marking, I am curious about this notion that one in four grades is wrong.

Q21 **Ian Mearns:** It is evidence that you gave to the Committee in the past.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** In the past, I have certainly said that a grade cannot be fully relied upon. Indeed, our research does show that our marks stack up well internationally. If I can describe what I mean by this in a bit more detail.

**Chair:** In a nutshell, please, because we have to get on. Can you be concise?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am happy to talk to Ian about this afterwards or on another occasion but, basically, if the mark is for a straightforward yes/no, right answer/wrong answer question—multiple choice, for example—it needs to be right. There is only one right answer. Many questions in subjects like history or English are long answer questions, essay questions, and it is quite right that one marker might give it seven marks and another marker eight. There is no right mark. That is a plain fact. If we try to eradicate that from the system, try to say there is only



one right answer, we constrain the nature of the answer. We ultimately constrain the nature of assessment itself, and that is not right. We have to live with a bit of discretion around the edges.

Q22 **Ian Mearns:** Marking and the scores that you give are not the same as grading at the end of the process.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Not at all.

Q23 **Ian Mearns:** It is the grading that is important in terms of the 25% variance, plus or minus one grade.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We are perhaps at cross-purposes here, because my point is that—

Q24 **Ian Mearns:** Marking feeds into the grade. Marking does feed in, but in terms of the overall grade variance you have accepted there is a 25% chance that the grade will be inaccurate plus or minus one grade.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Again I need to look back, but I am not sure when I ever accepted that. I am saying that a grade can be relied upon, but with the marking that contributes to the grade there may be legitimate differences between one marker and another. We need to recognise that and accept it as part and parcel of good assessment.

Q25 **Ian Mearns:** How does 2022 look? From the experience this year we hope that the virus is going to be under control. We hope that the vaccine might have done a lot of its work by late spring. What does 2022 look like?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** In terms of the examination process, we are making very significant changes, particularly in relation to the adaptations for these qualifications. Also, we are requiring a contingency series of papers for those students who may miss them.

Q26 **Ian Mearns:** The crucial question is: will the higher grades that have happened as a result of this year be baked into the system?

**Chair:** In other words—in your document you say you are not making any decisions about 2022 at this time—is hyperinflation here to stay?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am not sure I would call this hyperinflation. This is a pandemic cohort that we are responding to, I think in a thoughtful fashion. It is certainly going to be the case that we will try to match standards for 2021. We have purposely not said anything about 2022 because it does depend on the path of the pandemic.

What we have started to do this year, in terms of having good exchanges and really listening to a wide range of people about this—particularly those in the sector—we will need to continue to do that and look at the way the pandemic is affecting schools to reach decisions for 2022 and beyond. I note very carefully the reports now coming out from Ofsted showing the fundamental effect, even at primary school, of this pandemic.



Q27 **David Johnston:** Very quickly. Glenys, I want to raise a point I raised with the Secretary of State last week, which is about the use of holiday periods. I accept there is always disadvantage and you can never level the playing field, and that disadvantage has been accentuated this year. It seems to me that we need to make the best use of the holiday periods between now and next summer. The three-week delay is welcome but will probably not be enough by itself. I am not talking about schools just staying open and teaching the whole time, but what is your view on using that? Will you be giving any guidance to schools about that?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** It is not Ofqual's job at all to tell schools how and when to teach. The most significant thing for those students who are behind in their learning is for them to be supported with catch-up. Catch-up is the single most important thing by which to address lost learning. Of course, we welcome any further moves that would help with that.

Q28 **Tom Hunt:** I know it has been touched upon lightly already, but Wales takes a very different approach, with no exams. When that was being considered, what steps to take forward—changing exams, letting people know, giving them a rough idea what was going to be in the exams beforehand or having no exams—what were Ofqual's key concerns? If there had been two academic years back to back with absolutely no exams whatsoever, what do you think would have been the key negatives associated with that?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** The position is not settled in Wales. We are not still entirely sure how they are going to approach assessment. That is being worked through. However, we know from all of our research that examinations are the fairest way of assessment. There is a great deal of consensus about that now across the sector, and my fear, frankly, is that public confidence would fall if we were to simply walk away from examinations because of these difficulties.

I have to say as well that, in all our conversations with students, it is what they want. Students want the chance to show their worth and to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the subject. It would be a crying shame if we were not able to deliver those examinations.

Q29 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Dame Glenys. I have two questions on learning loss. The first one is on the advisory panel to look at differential learning. Do you think there is enough research that demonstrates the immediate and long-term impact of lost learning and to identify where funding should be prioritised, particularly as we know there is going to be regional variation? Will the panel include identifying social issues that we know widen the disadvantage gap, including increased levels of job insecurity and poverty? What powers will it have to make recommendations based on these issues?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Two questions there. First, on what we know about lost learning, it is important that we get as much collective research done as possible to identify it. We are playing our part there. We



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are conducting qualitative research with year 10 and year 13 students, for example, and their parents, carers and teachers, in order to understand their experience of learning loss and their feelings about assessment in the light of all that. We are collaborating with EPI and with the LSE/Exeter collaboration. We are holding the ring, collating and synthesising evidence from a wide range of sources and not just nationally but internationally.

We want to keep up with this and understand it in granular detail, not just by region but by locality. Indeed, what really matters here is the effect on schools, colleges and individual students. There is definitely a lot of earnest work going on, on our part, to keep abreast of it.

On to your second point, which I am glad you mentioned. Although the pandemic has a very significant effect in increasing differential loss of learning, because of wider factors it does exist in normal times; the socioeconomic factors that you mentioned, for example.

As to the lost learning working group that is being set up by Ministers—and I know you are seeing Nick Gibb later and may wish to ask him about it—the terms of reference are not agreed yet. Frankly, I don't know whether it is limited to pandemic lost learning or whether it will venture into that wider territory.

**Q30 Kim Johnson:** Can you let us know how large the cohort is of years 10 and 13 that you have mentioned?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I don't know, but I will get back to you.

**Q31 Kim Johnson:** My second question is about regional and school level data and analysis. I want to know whether DfE has shared data on teacher loss and pupil absences. Has this been broken down by ethnicity, gender, class, SEND and students on free school meals? What are the top-line disparities based on this information, and what recommendations can already be identified for Government action to be taken?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am afraid we do not have that data at the moment. We know that the Department has commissioned, I think, Renaissance Learning to do some qualitative research as well. It is collecting data but we do not have that yet. We are looking forward to getting it.

**Q32 Kim Johnson:** Do you have any idea how long it will take to collate that information?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I think we are expecting something in the new year. I will get back to you as soon as we know more clearly.

**Q33 Chair:** Can you confirm how many pupils passed or failed their A-levels in 2019, and how many does Ofqual expect will pass or fail in 2021? Is it the same as in 2020?



**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I do not know the numbers of how many A-level students in each subject reached the pass grade. What we are expecting is broadly similar figures in 2021 to 2020, although we will be evening out the differential between subjects, so at a subject level it will differ.

Q34 **Fleur Anderson:** Good morning, Dame Glenys. Building on assessing the effect of the pandemic and, as you were saying earlier, it is those overlays of the differences between schools. I want to ask some questions about the timetable for next summer, and how you will be learning from last summer and what went on to cause the last minute U-turn to enable you not to do that. Are you going to be using mocks to begin to understand?

As you said, you cannot just look at absence rates because some people are absent but learning really well. At some schools pupils will be absent but not learning. There is the digital divide and there is the absence. At what stage will you know and be able to understand what effect that is having on exam grades? When will you be making your assessment about how to smooth that out or look at anomalies and address them? That will be the difference between the most disadvantaged pupils, and looking at the impact of absence, digital divide and so on.

When will you be taking that to Ministers? What will be going on behind the scenes in advance of the big day when the exams are announced so that we can all have confidence that you have looked at the differences that the pandemic has made and made allowances for them?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** There is an awful lot in your questions there. I will attempt to deal with each of them, but please let me know if I miss anything.

The exam timetable is put back by three weeks. A lot of work has gone in by the Joint Council for Qualifications and exam boards to get that in good order, particularly looking at spacing out examinations within a subject to make sure that if a student misses one he has every chance of getting another. A good amount of careful work has gone into that.

The effect of that is that it condenses the marking window, and that is very much what we are focused on. As to how we make sure that things are delivered well for the summer, we are already on to that. For example, we are attending meetings now with exam boards as they look at how they will make adaptations at subject level. Therefore, we are on to that and we already have principles out for them and pro forma for them to complete at subject level. In short, we are increasing our operational oversight, and that is just one example of it. We will be monitoring marking recruitment, for example, very carefully.

When it comes to oversight, over the summer when the exams are happening, we already have very well-established arrangements for that. It is our bread and butter. That is what we have been doing for over a decade. We will apply the same approach as ever but will be more closely overseeing.



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For example, when awarding is happening, we are collecting data on a daily basis from all exam boards, cross-referencing and reviewing where their provisional boundaries are, looking for the outliers, looking to make sure that we have a consistent approach across subjects that is in accord with the approach that we are seeking to deliver overall, which is to broadly match 2020. A lot of effort does go into that.

**Q35 Fleur Anderson:** When will you be presenting that to Ministers, overlaying the absence rate over the qualifications and then—

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We will not be overlaying the absence rate over the qualifications. The qualification marking and grading is done as an entirely separate matter. The absence rate in schools is not a matter that will ultimately affect the grading or marking in any way. The exams will be of equal difficulty. They will be marked and they will be graded. It would be quite wrong to try to make any difference to that by looking at absence rates from schools. Indeed, it would be quite wrong for Ministers to have any role at all in grading.

**Q36 Fleur Anderson:** I know there is a proviso if you are off, having Covid or whatever, that you can sit at least one paper in the set.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Yes.

**Q37 Fleur Anderson:** Will there be an understanding about that difference between the exams they sat, when teachers have had to step in and provide their qualification and, therefore, the difference that might make so you can put that in your overall assessment to Ministers after the results come out, rather than the Minister seeing them afterwards and then changing—

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Thank you very much for explaining what you are after. You are quite right that, if a student is not able to take all of his or her papers but just some of them, we have mechanisms with exam boards for ensuring that student gets a fair grade. That is quite a dynamic business, because you might miss your last paper but you might still be able to take it.

That is all held within exam boards and the regulator. It is not for Ministers to particularly know of that during the process. No doubt we will have more meetings than usual with Ministers to assure them of our oversight. We will be able to give them some indication of how things are looking, but the figures will need to be collected by subject, by qualification and by exam board and then publicly produced. They would be part of our official statistics.

**Q38 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you, Dame Glenys. I want to come in on a reply you gave to a question from my colleague, Fleur, talking about the differences for students who have had more time out of school, and that it would be wrong to correct for that. I want to understand that further.

I think one of the biggest issues for students at the moment is a feeling



that some students have missed more time than others through no fault of their own, sometimes when they have been ill, sometimes not, but certainly some people's education has been more disrupted than others. What would be wrong with asking teachers to put in a box on the exam paper the number of disrupted days in that classroom or the number of disrupted days that individual pupil has had, as a proportion of the lessons in that particular subject?

Even if you decided not to adjust for it, you could at least demonstrate to those students that there was no statistically significant effect and, if there was a statistically significant effect through the disruption a student had received through no fault of their own, why would it be so wrong to correct for that?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We have suggested to Government—and I hope this suggestion is taken up in the lost learning working group that is now being established—that one way to recognise differential lost learning between one student and another would be for the teacher in an individual subject to make some evaluation of that. It would need to be kept quite straightforward in order to be doable, but you might be able to rate that in some way, RAG rate it or something.

Our point is that that could sit alongside a qualification grade, so the qualification grade could tell the users of that qualification not just next year but over an enduring period of time what knowledge and understanding of the subject that student had, so that grade serves its purpose. Alongside it there could be another measure of differential lost learning.

Forgive me, but I think if that happens there is a case for having it separate to the certificate, because some students would not want their certificate to reflect that. Also, I think there is a debate to be had about whether that is simply days lost to school, because there will be students who have had a few days lost but will have lost a mother to Covid or will be looking after siblings because their mother is a key worker on shift or whatever.

There is a question about whether more qualitative information could be played in some way. The reason why we do not say that plays into the grade is that the grade and the marks that underpin it have a purpose. They are to show the knowledge and understanding of the subject and, indeed, qualifications by statute need to do that. If we were to try to import that into the grading, it would distort and confuse what the grade is about. It would partly be about learning and understanding and partly about lost learning, but users would not know the balance of that and would not be able to differentiate. It would not know what the student did not know. What we are trying to do here is to protect the purpose of the qualification and the grade, and absolutely to recognise that more needs to be done to reflect the lost learning of this generation.

Q39 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Does the construct of generous marking



undermine the process?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Forgive me, there is no notion of generous marking. Examinations will be as difficult as ever, and they will be marked in the same way as ever, but there will not be generous marking. The issue is about where the grade boundaries are set to match 2020.

Q40 **David Johnston:** You have suggested that further adaptations may be needed for vocational and technical qualifications. What do you envisage happening, and when do you expect to announce the further adaptations?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** You will probably know that we have the Extraordinary Extended Regulatory Framework that looks after a good number of vocational qualifications, around 15,000 different ones, and 150 awarding bodies. Since early October we presented the framework, which is a development of one that we had over the summer. We have been encouraging awarding organisations since 23 October to get their adaptations out, and they are doing that. What we are expecting is quite a wide range of adaptations, depending on the structure of the qualification and the purpose that it needs to meet because they are all so very different.

The sorts of things we are seeing, for example, are more remote invigilation, bigger assessment windows, moving the assessment, changing the assessment in ways that best suit the circumstances. There is quite a wide range of things. We are seeing some good developments there, and we are seeing more consistency than we saw over the summer, but we are urging yet more.

Q41 **David Johnston:** I asked the heads in my constituency what they thought of the changes announced and they were broadly supportive. The two big things that came up were the differential learning that we have talked about and these qualifications. Obviously, earlier in the year there was a perception that vocational technical qualifications had been given a second-order priority in thinking. One thing they are keen to understand is about there being a reduced number of units for being awarded the qualification. At the moment, teachers are still trying to cram all the units into a shortened period of time. When will they have final confirmation of this? Is there a deadline for the adaptations to be done, for example?

**Chair:** In a nutshell, please.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I certainly would not say these are second-order qualifications or on the backburner with us. We have been on to it and got our arrangements out in October, well ahead of general qualifications. There is no deadline window because these qualifications run all of the time. Assessments happen all of the time. It is a rolling assessment for many of these qualifications. The picture is evolving. It is not yet stable but we are urging awarding bodies to get to that position. Some are already but some are considering yet further adaptations because we do not think they have gone far enough.



**Chair:** Ian, could I ask you to combine your questions if you can?

- Q42 **Ian Mearns:** I will certainly try, Chair. Dame Glenys, DfE's contingency arrangements allow for a circumstance where some pupils might be unable to attend any exams, but what would happen—as is happening here at the moment in the north of England—if a much bigger group of pupils miss out on crucial exams than the DfE is currently anticipating? What would we have to do then?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am hoping that that prospect is vanishingly small, first of all. We are making all these arrangements to make sure that a student could take at least one assessment. In some subjects that already have assessment we are doing—

- Q43 **Ian Mearns:** Can I interrupt you in that case? We are all hoping for the best. What preparations are you making if the best does not occur and we have to deal with a worst-case scenario?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** There are two things to cover there. First, students who miss all of their assessments in a subject, they might miss all their components and may not have non-exam assessment in the bag either. I think that is only going to be a handful of students, but I may well be proved wrong. We are putting in something exceptional this year by way of arrangements, and that will be in the form of validated, not moderated, teacher assessments for the very small proportion of students who cannot otherwise manage things.

I have to say straightaway here that validation is much lighter touch than moderation and I would urge schools not to do anything now. Schools and teachers do not need to start building portfolios of evidence now, not at all. If we do end up in this position, it will be an opt-in approach for students and it will be something at the time rather than built on performance now. It is not fair to students to start doing that now.

Secondly, you are quite right that, if there is a large-scale issue with delivery of exams it puts even that arrangement under strain. I have written to the Secretary of State to state that we hugely welcome the commitment to exams, but if there was to be any notion of us moving away from that on a large scale we would need to know pretty early in the spring term, to do more comprehensive arrangements.

- Q44 **Ian Mearns:** Given that we are probably now anticipating a situation where youngsters will be taught right up to the exam, where they might previously have had exam leave, that increases the danger of a whole cohort having to be isolated and going absent during an exam period.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** We have an exam timetable that is planned carefully to make sure that, even if you are off for a fortnight, you can still take an assessment and we can rely on that assessment. We also have as a next contingency the prospect of reserve papers. In every subject there will be a reserve paper that will be scheduled for after the end of the examination series, so for that student who unfortunately does



not manage to sit any assessment in the exam window, they have the contingency paper. That is plan B.

Plan C is for any student who, despite all that, misses all those assessments and does not have a non-exam assessment in the bag. For that student we are making exceptional arrangements around validated teacher assessments still to be worked through. I think we are as far as we can get down the road of contingency planning for the scenarios that may happen.

**Q45 Ian Mearns:** From your previous answer, it seems as though you have already ruled out that schools should be working towards an assessment portfolio as we speak. If we were going to do that, should that not have started at the beginning of the autumn term?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Thank you for returning to that because it worries me greatly, and I hear from schools that teachers, until they had certainty, have been doing this. I would encourage them not to. I do not see any prospect of us relying retrospectively on work undertaken by students. Students tell us they regard that as unfair, because at the time they were doing that work they were not doing it for the purpose of assessment. It is not the right answer. Also, it is taking up so much precious time for teachers. I would urge them not to do that.

**Q46 Ian Mearns:** Lastly, what is the logic in Ofqual announcing which topics are to be covered in exams after pupils have already taken their mock exams? Why not bring the announcement forward so that teachers and pupils have more notice?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** A couple of things there. As we reflected on last summer, mock exams are very different one from another. Sometimes they are done just to cover work already taught, for example, and sometimes it is the whole curriculum. There is not one notion of a mock exam that we could rely on. Indeed, in all of our conversations with the sector there is very little support for it. There is much more support for what we are doing now and also for having that contingency reserve paper after the exam series. Does that answer your question?

**Q47 Ian Mearns:** It does to a large extent, but a final comment. In terms of lost learning, there is a huge amount of data out there about what is happening in localities. For instance, the data about how many young people in a particular age group have contracted Covid or been tested positive. We know from the schools themselves and from local education authorities how many pupils are missing. The local directors of public health have a huge amount of information. We also know how many youngsters are on free school meals. All of that could build into doing something to compensate for lost learning. Youngsters on free school meals are much less likely to have appropriate technical equipment at home than their counterparts who do not have free school meals. It is broad brush, it is not massively scientific, but it is a guide in the right direction.



**Dame Glenys Stacey:** To repeat, I am absolutely empathetic. Differential lost learning is the worst thing I have experienced in education in all of my known work in the area. We are not the only country struggling with it; others are as well. In my view, it is not appropriate at all to try to compensate for that. Yes, you are right, all that data is there. We do not have data, for example, on the child in north Luton whose mother has died or has particular difficulties with a violent father.

We need to look at that data. There is a big job here for that lost learning working group, and indeed for higher and further education recognising the unique experiences that each student is having here, but we need to protect what an examination and a qualification are about.

Q48 **David Johnston:** Glenys, you may feel you have covered this question already. How will exam boards make sure that absences are genuine and related to Covid or other extenuating circumstances, and what mechanisms will be used?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** They have established arrangements already for identifying when a student is not able to attend, so they will follow those usual procedures. That requires the school to inform the exam board of that, and light-touch checks are undertaken. At the moment I am not convinced that further checks will be needed, but we will certainly be looking at it with exam boards in the new year.

Q49 **Fleur Anderson:** I have a more general question about your role as the regulator, Dame Glenys. I have mentioned before your conversations with Ministers. Since taking up your role as acting chief regulator, have you at any point felt that you have lacked sufficient independence when dealing with directions and requests from DfE Ministers?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Not one iota. I am a seasoned independent public servant. I have not only spent five years as an independent regulator but I have been a chief inspector at probation and have had other roles. I believe I understand independence entirely, and I have never felt in any way impinged upon in the role I am currently doing.

Q50 **Fleur Anderson:** When Ofqual came before us in June, it did not give us a strong impression that it had concerns with calculated grades and cancelling exams. Are you happy that Ofqual's advice had been followed in full by the DfE last year?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I am afraid I would not find that easy to answer because I was not the chief regulator at the time. I was not in the organisation. I am not sure I could confidently answer that and answer it well.

Q51 **Fleur Anderson:** We have been asking the Ministers further on this as well. In general, what advice would you give to your successor?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** Make sure you have the stamina for it. It would help if you are a bit younger than me. It is probably a young person's



game. Really get into the technical detail. Assessment is a very technical area and many of the solutions are counterintuitive. Learn from 2020. For example, I do not think Ofqual was particularly visible in 2020. It had a rather established way of communicating.

We need to be much more visible and much more interested in listening to others' ideas and working through with them to make sure they may be valid, but really listening and engaging. I think all of these things are very important, and understand your role and remit. I understand that standards are for us, but many aspects of 2021 are for Government, and make sure that you stick to your remit.

**Fleur Anderson:** Thank you very much. I am sure that will be very helpful. You certainly have a difficult job at the moment.

Q52 **Chair:** Dame Glenys, what did you think of the letter that we sent to the Secretary of State about what has happened with Ofqual and the examinations over the past six months?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I think you adopted a position that is quite understandable and expressed yourself plainly. There was nothing in there that I would not have expected. It is rather stark. To read it all in one go is quite stark, but it was all fair.

Q53 **Chair:** I still don't quite understand why Ofqual could not take a decision to peg to the 2019 grades but adjust the boundaries. Let's say you have a target of 5% getting As. That target would remain but you would adjust the grade boundaries to make it easier for people to get those As. Why did you need to peg it to the hyperinflation of 2020, as I said, recycling one error, a massive cock-up, to the next years?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** As I have explained, we need to peg it somewhere and the judgmental grade boundaries are those that matter. There are arithmetical ones in between but we need to peg it somewhere. In all of the discussions we have had across a wide range of people, because we are in a pandemic, because of its dismal effect on schooling and learning, there is broadly no public support for pegging it to 2019. Yes, there are some students who would argue that, and one or two of the—

Q54 **Chair:** Or your parent group. You have not been clear with us about proper employer engagement, about what their views are, apart from your conversation with the CBI.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I have said I will come back to you on that because others have engaged in those conversations, and I want to be accurate and right about that. A very small number of higher education institutions, the most prestigious, I would say, suggested 2019 but not in any great earnest. There was no suggestion from them that they would not be comfortable with us having the approach that we are adopting, whereas there was, overall, quite a compelling feeling across all those we



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spoke to that by far the vast majority supported the stance we are taking.

I think the issue here is that there is no right answer. Quite often in regulating there is a right answer; it might be difficult but it is pretty clear what the right thing to do is. Here in this pandemic, in these exceptional circumstances, there is no right answer and we have had to make a judgment call. In doing that, it seemed to me entirely right that we take into account and consider very carefully public confidence, given the experience of last year.

- Q55 **Chair:** Is that judgment call based on making things easier rather than solving a public policy problem? It is a political solution rather than solving a public policy issue of our exams and the future of our grades and exams in the years to come.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** I will remind us all that the examinations are not changing one iota. The questions will be just as difficult and wide ranging as they always are, and the marking will be of the same standard, so the mark standard will remain the same. Students will find that. It is not that they are getting an easier test. We are not letting go of the core things here, the curriculum and the learning that must happen, but, yes, it is right that we are recognising that we are in a pandemic and we are in it for some time. There needs to be a discussion, when we get to it through the course of the next 12 months, about where we go from here, but I repeat that this pandemic is washing through and it is not washed through any time soon.

- Q56 **Chair:** You have gone for the path of least resistance. You have chosen the easy option rather than necessarily the right public policy option, just so you avoid any aggro that you have had over the past year.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** If I may say, I am pretty used to aggro and I will always do the right thing. This is not an easy path for us. This is technically very difficult. A much easier path for delivery would have been a different one. We are not interested in the easier path. We are trying to do the right thing here, looking at our statutory objectives, thinking carefully about public confidence and keeping in mind the experience of the students in this year and possibly those beyond.

- Q57 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** It seems to me that qualifications have two purposes. One is to see if someone has reached a standard of knowledge on a particular subject, which you have been very clear about. The other is so that employers and those wanting to allocate university places can compare individual students to their peer group to see who has achieved a higher level of knowledge in that subject than their fellow students. You have accepted there is grade inflation in 2020, and you seem to have decided that grade inflation should be preserved for 2021 because all but the elite institutions seem to want that. How will this be fair to the students who come forward in 2022? If everyone gets much higher grades, how will the universities be able to distinguish between the



different students?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** There are two questions there. How will this be fair to students in 2022? Students in school now have experienced lockdown for 2020, absences from school for 2020-21, and I hope they will get a better learning experience for 2022. We need to see how the pandemic washes through so that we can have the broad discussion we need about where standards are set for 2022. I think it would be a mistake for us to think now that we are in a particular position for 2021, therefore it stays the same. I think it is absolutely right to see how schools are affected, to collect the data and then to reach a position for 2022. If we were to try to move straight back to 2019, it would not be fair to students. That is my personal view, but there is a discussion to be had.

Q58 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** It contradicts itself to an extent because, on one hand, you are saying you would not want to do any form of referencing by altering grades based on people's differential lost learning because they have to meet the standard, which is a perfectly reasonable argument. The grade inflation this year was unintentional, and yet you decided to bake it in for next year intentionally, which sort of defeats the object that everyone must be to a standard, doesn't it?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** No, not at all. We are not baking it in as it fell. As you know, we are making sure it is more evenly distributed. That will be the position for the 2021 cohort, and it seems to us the fairest position to adopt and it is a judgment we make. We need to see what will be the fairest position for the 2022 cohort, and that really depends on how the pandemic washes through. When it comes to differential lost learning, as we have discussed in this session, there is not an acceptable way, a fair way, in which differential lost learning can be recognised within the qualification grade, but more needs to be done to recognise it alongside the grade.

On the second part of your question about higher education and further education colleges making choices—let us not forget the GCSE cohort—the colleges and universities have systems. They are very used to not relying just on the grade. We are talking to universities and colleges now about the stance we are taking and making sure they are fully aware of what this will mean. For example, we are having conversations with UCAS, which is at ease with this. What they really want is more data and information beyond the grade from the system as a whole; for example the data about free school meals is very precious to them if they can get it. They are very used to systems that look beyond the grade. That does not mean that more could not be done. The lost learning group might decide on some sort of statement of lost learning to be provided to those sorts of organisations.

Q59 **Fleur Anderson:** To follow up on the conversations you are having with universities, some universities are starting to drop their grade offers and will be doing it on the basis of the mocks, which is before you have



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decided the full extent of the exams and what will be in the exams. Can you say a bit more about what you understand the impact on universities will be? For example, my local university lost a lot of students who went to other universities when the U-turn was made last summer. Have you talked to them about that, and are you sure that you can keep a more solid offer for next summer?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** You are right, one or two universities have dropped one grade and made that public. I am aware, of course, that universities have other pressures at the moment, which no doubt will affect their general approaches to selecting students. They are not a matter for me, but we are not doing it in a vacuum. Now that our stance on standards is set, though, it is stated and so it enables universities to reflect knowing that position. I know they already strive to allow for disadvantage, but it will now be more important than ever that they make every effort and consider how an individual student got that grade.

We are very happy to assist UCAS and others in the interpretation of that or what we can provide. The Office for Students has a role in widening participation and in overseeing university admissions to make sure that they are fair overall and, of course, they will step up to the plate.

Q60 **Chair:** To be very clear, how does grade inflation help demonstrate a student's degree of knowledge, which you stated was your aim for students?

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** The assessment itself is the same assessment as ever. For a student to do well compared to his peer he must demonstrate knowledge and understanding better than that of his peer. That is the long and short of it. I quite accept that in a different world, in a pre-pandemic world, what we are doing here would be unthinkable. You know that from all my years as chief regulator, but the fact is that we are in a pandemic and we are seeking to recognise it and to listen to all of those across the sector to get to the right decision. As I have said, it is a judgment call.

Q61 **Chair:** You mentioned earlier that you are a public servant, and I think whatever our questions, whatever our views, you are showing a pretty dedicated public servant. Thank you for taking on this incredibly difficult role for a short time, especially given what has happened over the past few months. I pay tribute to you and your team at Ofqual for your work and your public service. I wish you well. I think you are finishing at the end of the year, if I am not mistaken.

**Dame Glenys Stacey:** That is right.

**Chair:** I think we, as a Committee, show our appreciation to you taking on a very tough role in a very few months. Good luck to you, and I hope you have a wonderful Christmas and new year.



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**Dame Glenys Stacey:** If I may say, Chair, it has been a privilege to do it and there is a truly excellent team at Ofqual. I take my hat off to them. They continue to do excellent work and it is in safe hands. Thank you.

**Chair:** Thank you. We will start the session with the Minister in about three minutes. We will have a three-minute recess.

## Examination of Witness

Witness: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP.

Q62 **Chair:** Welcome, Minister. Thank you for coming today. I think I said at the end of the last meeting that you are always accountable to the Committee, and you had very short notice about this session. On behalf of all of us, we always appreciate that you are very willing to appear, often at a moment's notice, and that is valued by all of us.

Having said that, we have some questions about the publication of documents between what went on in the summer and the Committee. We were given assurances that we would be given documents. Assurances were given by Ministers in the House on 9 September that the Department would work with our Committee and provide us with the information that we requested. This was a commitment reaffirmed by the Secretary of State on 16 September, when he told the Committee that the Department would do the absolute maximum to ensure as much information as the Committee required was made available.

Unanimously, across the two political parties on the Committee, we find it disappointing, to say the least, that nearly three months on not a single paper has been provided to us and we have been told, in essence, that we can see summaries of notes. You gave me assurances in the House of Commons, not on the Floor but privately before the debate, that we would be given the documents. What is your comment on that? I will bring in any other member who may want to speak on it. Do you want to respond?

**Nick Gibb:** We want to be as open and transparent as we can be. I think what was offered to the Committee was a summary of the contents of all the different meetings that were relevant to your inquiries. The issue for the Department is the protection of civil servants in taking informal notes of meetings, and that they can then give candid and free advice to Ministers without worrying that what they say and write will be published. That is the issue, and it goes beyond just the DfE. It is a cross-Whitehall issue.

Having said that, the secretariat has written to the Committee setting out what we can give the Committee to help them form the best judgment about what happened in the summer. We want to be open and transparent and I stand by my commitment to you, Robert, about giving



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as much information as we can without undermining some of those important principles of how the civil service operates.

Q63 **Chair:** It has possibly been hinted at in the letters that the Clerks and perhaps one or two members of the Committee will go to the DfE to look through the documents. Is that an acceptable compromise? It is disappointing to say that we will be given only summaries, which are pretty subjective.

**Nick Gibb:** The summaries are written by civil servants. The Secretary of State set out in his letter to the Committee how we can take these discussions forward, and I think that is the best approach.

**Chair:** Are there any other members who would like to comment on that at all?

Q64 **Ian Mearns:** Minister, the Chair has stated that our disappointment is cross-party among the members of the Committee. In fact, some members expressed anger at what has been transpiring. In the last analysis, I am afraid to say that, if you are outside of this looking in, you would think, "What is there to hide?" I think we are all very conscious of the confidentiality of such correspondence or transfers of information between the DfE and a regulatory body, but the point is that to the man on the Clapham omnibus it looks as though there is something that you don't want to have disclosed and it is not just about the confidence of civil servants. I find it very, very disappointing myself.

**Nick Gibb:** It is not that at all, Ian. We want to be as open and transparent as possible about what happened. What was offered to the Committee was a way of delivering that without undermining some of the principles that protect civil servants and the way they take notes and give free advice to Ministers. It is an important principle. We have a very long-established and world-renowned civil service in this country, and some of the important principles of the way they conduct business need to be protected, but the Secretary of State has written to the Committee and I know that conversations are still happening about how we can accommodate the Committee's request in the most effective way.

Q65 **Chair:** We will move on. We just wanted to register our disappointment in what has gone on in a courteous way but, nevertheless, there is significant disappointment from all members of the Committee.

I think you were on the previous call. I don't know if you were listening to the previous session. I am going to ask you some of the questions in the beginning that I asked Dame Glenys.

You obviously know the statistics of the increase in A-level grades, the increase in GCSE grade 4 and above in certain subjects. It has been pretty huge and the proportion of A-level grades, A or A\*, increased by 12.9 percentage points and by as much as nearly 17 percentage points in further maths. Neil Sheldon, a former chief examiner, a member of Ofqual's expert advisory group on exams during the pandemic, has, in



essence, said just bumping everyone up by half a grade doesn't achieve anything. It doesn't do anything for relative disadvantage. Do you agree that raising the inflationary tide to lift all boats will do nothing to change the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers?

**Nick Gibb:** I did listen to Dame Glenys. I agree with her that, in a way, it does help the confidence of the least prepared and those who have suffered the most disruption, but it is not the main measure with which we will address that issue. The reason I think it is important that the grading in 2021 is similar to that in 2020 is about fairness between those two years. The 2021 cohort has actually suffered from the pandemic in a greater way than the 2020 cohort, who would have completed most of their courses by the time we had to close schools to most pupils in March.

This cohort has seen a large proportion of the first year of their courses—they were year 10 and year 12—being disrupted by the closure of schools to most pupils. We need to make sure that they are treated fairly. The issue of the different experiences of schools in different areas of infection around the country has been dealt with through the package of measures that was announced last Thursday.

Q66 **Chair:** You were very clear in 2020 that you did not want grade inflation, and that was the reason given by the Secretary of State for introducing the dreaded algorithm in the first place. I quoted in the previous session that the DfE gave Ofqual a direction on 31 March 2020 that said, "Ofqual should ensure, as far as possible, that qualification standards are maintained and the distribution of grades follows a similar profile to that of previous years". Shouldn't we be doing all we can to put this year's grades behind us and get back to normal?

You could do that by pegging it to 2019 but, by dropping the grade boundaries, standardising grades. Surely what you are doing is baking grade inflation into the system for years to come. Have you gone from the person who campaigned for years against grade inflation? It is goodbye Mr Chips and hello Evita Peron.

**Nick Gibb:** No. This is a pandemic. We are in the middle of the biggest crisis this country has faced since the second world war and a lot of young people have seen their education disrupted as a consequence. You are right, the direction to Ofqual was that as far as possible they should maintain the same grade standards as in previous years, but I think it is important for fairness that the grading for this year's cohort is similar to that of the immediate previous cohort. That view has received widespread support in all our consultations and discussions.

Q67 **Chair:** Well, not from the parent sample that Ofqual consulted. I still don't understand why you cannot just peg to 2019 but adjust the grade boundaries.

**Nick Gibb:** I think it would be seen as unfair, given how much this particular cohort has seen their time at school disrupted. Schools were closed to most of the pupils from March through to the end of the



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summer. We brought back year 12 and year 10 part time in June, July, but really most of their education has been remote. Even now, even from September when schools had gone back full time, students up and down the country have been self-isolating for periods, particularly in areas of high infection. There has been quite a bit of disruption for these pupils, and I think it would be seen as unfair if we started to return to the grading of 2019 and earlier this particular year. I accept your point that we will need to return at some time and take a view about what the long-term impact of this will be. That work has already started, but also we have to take—

Q68 **Chair:** Could you have pegged it between 2019 and 2020, rather than going from just pegging it directly to 2020 where there was already huge grade inflation because of the centre-assessed grades?

**Nick Gibb:** That is an option that we obviously considered, but I think this is the wrong cohort with which to start that process, given everything they have suffered. As Dame Glenys said, the work on smoothing the subjects, for example, the small-entry subjects that had a higher rate of grade inflation in 2020 compared to 2019, in a way is a small step towards getting back to the grading that we had before 2020 and making sure that the lower grade boundaries were credible.

Other than those things, I think it is important that the general grading is similar in 2021 to 2020. We will have to look again as the pandemic proceeds about what we do in 2022, because the 2022 cohort will have suffered some disruption to their education as well.

Q69 **Chair:** Of all the people in all the world to make such a decision, if it had been said it was going to be Nick Gibb I would have said it is impossible to bake grade inflation into the system in the way that you have. As I say, it is genuinely goodbye Mr Chips in all your work on not dumbing down and reducing grade inflation over the past few years.

**Nick Gibb:** As Dame Glenys said, this is not inflation. This is a response for these particular cohorts to the pandemic. We want to get to a system that we had very successfully reached after 2011 where there was no inflation or minimal inflation in the grading system.

Q70 **Chair:** What direct consultation did you have with employers about the grading?

**Nick Gibb:** Those consultations are things that Ofqual carried out. I felt it was very important in developing the package for 2021—which is not just about grading, it is about all the other things we have introduced, the contingency papers, advance notice and the exam aids—to be sure that, in all the decisions we took, we involved the sector. We have had fortnightly meetings with the unions and stakeholders. We have had similar fortnightly meetings with—

Q71 **Chair:** But not with employers?



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**Nick Gibb:** Not with employers.

Q72 **Chair:** Surely they are crucial because they are the people who need to know whether exam grades are to be valued or not and how they will take them.

**Nick Gibb:** Officials will have had all kinds of discussions with various representative groups. I can send you details of the discussions that officials have had during this period. My concern has always been making sure that the sector, the teachers, the people who deliver these qualifications in our schools, are involved every step of the way in some of the very important decisions we have taken. It is not just deciding what to do. It is also deciding what not to do, for example whether to have some form of valid mock in the spring in all schools. We have tried to involve, as far as possible, the people who are involved in teaching our children in the decisions that we have had to make.

Q73 **Chair:** I want to come in on the expert group on differential learning. Is it right that the group is not expected to report back until spring 2021? I think the Secretary of State said that in the House of Commons.

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, and we will continue to talk to them throughout this period. It is an advisory group of experts.

Q74 **Chair:** Who will be appointed to the Government's expert group? Do you have a list of the people?

**Nick Gibb:** Not yet. We are still working through that, and we will be able to announce something shortly.

Q75 **Chair:** Will there be a gagging measure on members of the team? Given the monumental decisions that are being made by the Department and the profound effect on the lives of children, do you not agree that there should be a transparent way of arriving at those decisions? Will the Department be transparent about the discussions and recommendations that flow from the expert group's meetings, and will it allow the recommendations to be scrutinised and challenged, publishing the minutes of their meetings for all to see?

**Nick Gibb:** On the important measures that we have taken to deal with the issues of differential learning, the main decisions have been taken, and that is to do with advance notice and exam aids. What we are asking the expert group to look at is how the pandemic progresses during 2021 and what other—

Q76 **Chair:** Yes, but will it be transparent? In a nutshell, are you going to make sure that all the minutes, the conclusions, the recommendations are transparent as they happen publicly?

**Nick Gibb:** This is an advisory group to the Secretary of State. It is not an independent commission reporting publicly. It is an advisory group of experts who want to be able to give advice freely to the Secretary of



State and, upon that advice, the Secretary of State will make decisions that will then be published.

**Q77 Chair:** Because the recovery advisory group had to sign gagging orders, and non-disclosure was also an issue when it came to admitting experts to the team that was appointed to advise on the ill-fated algorithm. If you do not make it transparent as it happens, you will lead to some of the problems that we had with Ofqual and the examinations. They were not properly open to public scrutiny in terms of the algorithm.

**Nick Gibb:** This particular group is a group of experts who will want to be able to have a full and frank discussion in their meeting.

**Chair:** It is not going to be transparent while it happens?

**Nick Gibb:** If you are asking people to give up their time, experts to come in and give advice to the Secretary of State, you need to give them the space to be able to do that without each of their meetings being a public meeting. That is very important. The decisions that the Secretary of State takes will be published. What this group is going to do is look to see how the pandemic progresses and whether there are further measures, in addition to those we have already announced last week, which are the main measures in tackling—

**Q78 Chair:** You confirmed that it is not meant to report back until spring 2021. Is that not too late? Does that realistically leave enough time to put in place the necessary measures to level the playing field? Will it not just lead to imprecise corrective measures after the exams rather than what we really want, which is measures now—especially given the amount of children who are not learning for one reason or another because of Covid—to address learning loss now?

**Nick Gibb:** That is what we announced last week. That is the main package of measures. The contingency paper, the three-week delay that we announced several weeks ago to increase teaching time, the changes to assessment that Ofqual announced in the summer. Those are the measures that are designed to tackle the disrupted education that young people have had and the differential learning that different students have suffered up and down the country. Those are the measures. What the advisory group will be advising the Secretary of State on are things such as the issue that Dame Glenys raised about whether there is some form of information that can be attached to A-levels and GCSE—

**Q79 Chair:** Basically to look after the event rather than before, that is what this advisory group is doing?

**Nick Gibb:** That is one of the examples of the kind of thing that they might want to do. There may be other things that they can come up with. That is why we are asking experts from different parts of the sector, from special educational needs, from the vocational side and from schools, to give their best expert advice to the Secretary of State if there are further measures we can take.



**Q80 Christian Wakeford:** Similar questions to what I asked Dame Glenys. Obviously I welcome the steps that were taken last week. It is going to remove some levels of anxiety ahead of the exam period and potentially make them easier in what is a very difficult year. What work has been done to address the regional disparity? For areas like mine, where I am aware of some children who have had six, seven, eight cases of isolation as opposed to some areas where they might be very fortunate and not had any, how are we looking at tackling that issue so that exams are truly fair and are a level playing field?

**Nick Gibb:** This has been the issue that has worried me the most right from the beginning, that different students will have experienced different levels of disruption to their education. Even from September onwards, different schools in different parts of the country with different infection rates will have seen different levels of self-isolation and so on. How do we make sure that when they go into the exam room in June 2021 it is as fair as it can possibly be for those different students from different parts of the country?

We did look at issues—and Dame Glenys touched on it in her evidence—about whether you can make adjustments to the grading system to reflect that. In reality, those sorts of adjustments would bring their own unfairnesses. If you did it on a regional basis, what about schools that did not have disruption in those regions? They would get the same benefit of additional marks, or whatever it is, to the grading system, which will be unfair.

If you did it at the school level there would be different pupils within that school who will have suffered differently. If you do it to an individual level and say, “If you had 20 days’ self-isolation then you get these extra marks”, some students thrive with remote education and some find it a struggle, motivation and so on, and have different home circumstances. That is unfair. What about somebody who is off for 19 days rather than 20 days? There is this cliff-edge issue. There are vast unfairnesses with such a system and we did discuss this with Ofqual, the regulator, to see whether it is possible.

The best approach is the advance notice, and people say the advance notice of content is available for everybody, including areas with low infection rates and very little self-isolation. If you have not had a disrupted education, you have covered the whole curriculum by the spring, of course there is some advantage in knowing that this particular area will be in the exam and this other area will not. You can focus your revision on that.

There is some advantage but there is a much greater advantage to a student who has not covered the whole curriculum and gets told at the end of January that they can spend the next four months focusing on these things they know will be in the exam, “Here are some exam aids so you do not have to memorise all the formulae”. The differential gain will



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be higher to those students than it will be to a student who has covered the whole curriculum.

Q81 **Christian Wakeford:** I appreciate the response in regards to differential gain. However, that would only be the case if you have been in class in the first place to learn those particular topics. If they are some of the ones who have been left behind, they are catching up just to get into the same place as someone else is now.

**Nick Gibb:** Do not forget, the remote education is an important aspect of how we are responding to this pandemic and the Secretary of State issued a direction in October, which came into enforcement on 22 October, that made it a legal requirement—and it is already an expectation of schools who are already delivering—with very detailed expectations in the statutory guidance about what schools should be delivering. We have just recently enhanced that by setting out the number of hours of study that we think should be provided remotely.

They will not be sitting at home not doing any study. They will be engaged in this remote education, continuing to study at home, but I accept that however good remote education is, for a lot of pupils it is never going to be as good as being in class with a teacher, motivated and being able to talk back and forth to the teacher the whole time.

Q82 **Christian Wakeford:** Is the Department sharing regional school attendance with Ofqual? If not, why not? That should surely be a determining factor in what further actions, if any, are to be taken.

**Nick Gibb:** In the middle of December we will be publishing more detailed attendance figures, broken down by region. We have those attendance figures. The latest figures, as of 3 December, we are seeing overall attendance rates of 85.5%, 99.4% of schools are open. When you break that down between secondary and primary, it is lower in secondary at—

Q83 **Chair:** Sorry to interrupt. How many pupils in exam years have missed school?

**Nick Gibb:** We do not collect the attendance by year groups. We have been very conscious, because all this information comes every day through a portal that schools complete, and we are getting completion rates of about—

Q84 **Chair:** Surely that is the crucial thing. Obviously it is good to know about all students but, as a Department, isn't the crucial thing for you to find out how many exam-year students are missing school?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, and there is lots of information that we could ask for that would be useful, but you have to be cognisant of the work that is required on schools to fill it in every day. We collect attendance every day and we can make a distinction between secondary and primary. You can



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draw your own conclusions if you know the secondary attendance rate of 81% as of 3 December—

Q85 **Chair:** Why is it a lot of extra work for schools just to provide the number of kids in exam years?

**Nick Gibb:** Every bit of extra data is just one little thing. It is then you add it all—

Q86 **Chair:** Would you not be able to get a proper picture of what is going on and what needs to be done?

**Nick Gibb:** We do not just rely on this. We also have our Regional Schools Commissioners team, the React teams, all over the country. They are talking regularly to secondary schools in their area, so we also have intelligence that comes to the Department via that route, so we do know what is happening in our schools.

Q87 **David Johnston:** I accept all the arguments you make about the disadvantages that children have every year. I am quite interested in what happens with schools in the holiday period, because that seems to be a good opportunity to try to catch up on some of the learning that has been lost earlier in the year. Do you agree with that, and what guidance is your Department giving to schools to try to ensure that children and young people are using those periods more than they might in other years?

**Nick Gibb:** These are matters for schools to decide. We have given very clear expectations of what we expect of a school if they have to resort to remote education for those students who are self-isolating. They will know that students have missed out by not being at school. The Government are giving £1 billion of catch-up funding to schools, £650 million of which is just on a per pupil basis, £80 per pupil.

Schools are very aware that their students need to catch up and they will be going the extra mile—particularly for the exam-year students but not just for that year group—to make sure that they catch up. They will be doing that in different ways, whether that is homework during the holiday period or extra tuition. The National Tutoring Programme is a £350 million programme involving 33 tutoring groups, and we will have 15,000 tutors when it is fully rolled out. We hope to reach about 250,000 students once it is fully up and running. That is a very effective way of ensuring students catch up.

Schools up and down the country are working phenomenally hard. Not only keeping the schools open, dealing with Covid, keeping the school Covid secure and everything else they are doing with track and trace, they are dealing with catch-up and they are doing so very effectively.

Q88 **Tom Hunt:** Whatever is proposed, I think there would be slight shortcomings, but whatever is proposed in relation to exams is a lot better than having no exams. I am glad that the Department has



provided that certainty.

A quick question about English, maths and science, which some may call the core subjects. Was there ever a feeling in the Department that, when you were making decisions about the exams next year, perhaps it would have been better to focus on English, maths and science, to make sure that every pupil covered the full curriculum in those core subjects and had an exam that was very much like normal in those core subjects, and perhaps not have exams in some of the non-core subjects? I do not necessarily agree with that. I am just asking whether that was considered. I am interested to know how that was thought about by the Department.

Thirdly, almost to echo some of the comments made by the Chair, if you were a GCSE or A-level student in 2019 and you had a regular exam, and did not know what was going to be in it and regular grade boundaries, not particularly generous. Say that, last year and this year, you are in a part of the country that has not been impacted that much by Covid, your school has not closed, you have not had to self-isolate much at all, and also you had the benefit of having first-class remote education and your school was very good with it. In addition to that, you have the advantage of knowing early next year what is going to be in the exam, plus you have some generous grade boundaries. I can see how, in certain circumstances, for those pupils who are going to be sitting those exams in 2021 there might be a distinct advantage compared with those who sat them in 2019. That is something to bear in mind.

**Nick Gibb:** These are not decisions that we would have taken had it not been for the pandemic, you are absolutely right. Having exams is the fairest way to enable students to demonstrate, through their own work, what they know and what they have achieved. Those two things are very important. You also have to reflect on the disruption that even students in low infection areas, and even students of good schools with excellent remote provision, will still have suffered some educational loss during this period. It is important that we do everything we can to boost the confidence of those students this year. That is what we are trying to do with the grading issues and all those adaptations to the exams that we have introduced.

On the issue of whether we should narrow the curriculum to English, maths and science in this year as a way of reflecting that loss, obviously this was an issue we thought about but swiftly rejected because we think it is important that students continue to receive a broad and balanced education. We said so in our guidance to the opening of schools for September. They may want to focus at the beginning on some of those core subjects to help them catch up, but they should pretty rapidly get back to the normal curriculum so that students are having a broad and balanced curriculum, including the arts and sport.

**Q89 Tom Hunt:** I have a couple of teachers in my constituency who feel it is necessary to go forward with exams in GCSEs and A-levels but perhaps



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SATs should have been dealt with slightly differently because, although they are important for measuring schools' progress, they are slightly less important for the particular pupil's life chances and their future. Was the Department ever tempted to approach them differently and not go ahead with the exams in the way they are with A-levels and GCSEs?

**Nick Gibb:** Again, we gave a great deal of thought to this issue. It is important that we use the SATs to understand how much education has been lost, because there is a similar concept of comparable outcomes and so on with SATs. We and the schools will be able to see how much has been lost. We have a brilliant research programme undertaken between Renaissance Learning and the EPI that has a big sample size, and that will also show what educational loss there has been.

We have adapted the SATs. We have taken out the grammar, punctuation and spelling this year. We are not making the multiplication tables check compulsory this year, although it is still available and I would encourage schools to use it as a computer-based test. It is good to ensure that pupils know their tables. We are keeping a phonics check as compulsory this year, because it is fundamental to making sure children are still learning to read, but we are not going to publish the results of the key stage 2 reading, writing and maths tests. It will go towards assessing schools' progress, which is on the intranet available to Ofsted but not to the public.

Q90 **Ian Mearns:** Briefly, before I move on to that, what datasets will the DfE be providing to the advisory group on differential learning? You do not have to answer me now but, as a Committee, it would be extremely useful to know what information base the advisory panel are working from, as opposed to just their own experience.

**Nick Gibb:** I will send you more details, but they will be given everything we have. For example, I mentioned Renaissance Learning and the EPI study. They will have all that data to look at as well. Everything we have, they will have.

Q91 **Ian Mearns:** Moving on to Ofsted. How can Ofsted's role be made much stronger to ensure that children are learning, whether in school or remotely, when they need to be at home owing to Covid? That is not just a question in terms of what Ofsted will be doing to oversee the schools. Also, what will Ofsted's role be to make sure the DfE's promise to provide equipment to schools for children who are less well advantaged has been successful? I know, from talking to a large group of head teachers in my own area, that the promises were never fulfilled in terms of the types of equipment and the amount of equipment that they were initially led to believe they would get to assist that remote learning for some of the more disadvantaged pupils.

**Nick Gibb:** Just on the remote education. We are spending nearly £200 million. We supplied 220,000 computers to disadvantaged students before the summer, particularly focused on vulnerable children who have



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a social worker, so they can keep in touch with social services. We are committed to another 340,000 on top of that, of which over 100,000 were already delivered in the first weeks of the September term. We will be able to publish more figures about that shortly.

We calculated, based on disadvantage, free school meals and an estimate based on Ofcom research about the proportion that were likely to have a device at home, and we allocated figures to each school. Because we wanted to make sure the flows met the demand from schools, for children who were at home self-isolating, we restricted that to 20% so that we could make sure we delivered to every disadvantaged child self-isolating at home who does not have a computer, and they had it within 48 hours of the school ordering it.

The supplies are coming through. They are being delivered. There is not a shortage of getting those supplies through, and we will have more to say about this in the coming weeks. It has been a phenomenal success story, the way this country has procured vast numbers of computers on the global market and delivered them to schools.

**Q92 Ian Mearns:** It might sound a bit cheeky, but would you let Ofsted oversee the DfE's operation of that because it is having an impact on children's learning out there? Ofsted is there to look at schools and what teachers do, but would it not be nice to have an independent person overseeing the work of the DfE in that respect? I have a suspicion about the distribution methodology for that technical equipment, because a lot of schools in Gateshead, for instance, and in the wider north-east area, are telling me they only got a very small fraction of what they were promised.

**Nick Gibb:** That is correct. They were promised 100%. They were promised a computer for every disadvantaged child in their school who we estimated would not have a device. They were given a figure and we subsequently said, "No, you are going to get 20% of that figure" and we then sent the computers representing 20% of that figure. But those children are in school. They do not need those computers at that point. At the point when they do need them, when they are self-isolating, and if the allocation they have received is not enough for those pupils, which it is unlikely to be, within 48 hours we will send them the relevant computers that they need. All they have to do is ring the DfE line and they will have them sent. We did that deliberately to make sure every disadvantaged pupil at home self-isolating who did not have a computer would have them.

**Q93 Ian Mearns:** Would you welcome independent oversight of that process?

**Nick Gibb:** I thought that was your job. We are always open to providing you with as much information as you need.

**Ian Mearns:** Not quite, Minister.



**Nick Gibb:** Just on the other issue of Ofsted. We suspended inspections because the schools are under huge pressure. They have been throughout this pandemic. They have tried to keep the schools secure for Covid reasons. They are trying to get children to walk the one-way systems, stagger their lunch break, wash their hands, all this is happening every day, and deal with track and trace when there are cases identified, and help with catch-up, and deliver the curriculum in the normal way.

We wanted to take some pressure off them. We did that by not publishing league tables for 2020 and 2021, and by suspending routine Ofsted inspections. We have taken a decision not to resume those in January but to do it in the summer term, provided that everything goes as we hope it will with the pandemic.

Ofsted is going to be paying visits to some schools, monitoring visits to inadequate schools, schools with two RIs—requires improvement—and it will discuss things like the curriculum and remote education, attendance and things like that.

Q94 **Christian Wakeford:** A quick one on the digital world, as Ian was alluding to in regards to computers. Would a quicker, easier and less bureaucratic way be to say to a school, "Right, you require 10 computers. Here is the budget, you go away and procure them yourselves"? That way we know they are getting the equipment they need to the timeframes they need.

In regards to the advisory group, obviously it is great that that is being formulated and will meet moving forward, but if certain regions within that advisory group say that further action and intervention is needed, will that be forthcoming? If so, is spring too late to make a natural decision on the feedback from the advisory group?

**Nick Gibb:** We will only be able to take decisions that are feasible at that point. The point of the advisory group is to keep monitoring what continues to happen during 2021 so that we are able to respond to it in the best way, but the major decisions that have to be taken by December have been taken. It is no good the advisory group advising us to do something back in November, those decisions that need to be taken on this. Throughout this whole process we have very methodically, step by step, taken decisions—and they are big decisions that spawn multiple other decisions—and we have had to rule out things as well, the decisions on things we are not going to proceed with. We have taken those decisions in order of when they needed to be made.

The key early decision was about the delay of the timetable, and that had to be announced swiftly. That was a big decision because it has big consequences on marking, on the time period of the exams, getting those results back and so on, and the exam boards needed to know all that. We have dealt with that. It was the right decision, in my judgment. Then we dealt with the package that we announced last week. Again, that was a



raft of decisions that were required and we consulted widely on it. Again, we have taken those decisions. I have forgotten what your other question was now.

**Christian Wakeford:** It was in regard to devolving to schools.

**Nick Gibb:** We are buying over 500,000 computers. You cannot just go down to PC World, even a big branch, and say, "I want 20,000 computers for this region." It just will not have them. We have had to have these computers built from scratch and have them shipped in. There was one day last summer when 27,000 computers were being delivered in one day to schools and local authorities around the country. It is a huge operation. I hope you will look into what happened, because it is a great success story for this country to have procured so many computers in such a short time.

Q95 **Fleur Anderson:** Just following on with the digital divide, the worst-case scenario for disadvantage is going to be that group of students who are in schools that have been off the most because of having to shut down. They might have had Covid themselves. They may have missed exams. Therefore, there will be a group that have the least access to computers and to the data that goes along with computers. Do you have a list of those high-risk schools that you can maybe ask the advisory panel to tell you about now, so that you can address the digital problems?

I am seeing in my local schools that they do not have all the computers that you are talking about. Are you aware of those gaps in provision, and the gaps in data as well as computers, so that you can be addressing them now rather than hearing about them in the headlines next summer?

**Nick Gibb:** We are working with the telecoms companies on free data. We are doing quite a lot of work with them. We know that is an issue about the cost of data for families, and there is a lot of work going on. We have already been able to provide some free data to disadvantaged families. The concerns you receive from schools will be about them not getting the allocation. We deliberately reduced that to 20%, but they will not have any problem getting a computer for any disadvantaged child who is at home self-isolating and who does not have a device. They will get this within 48 hours of ordering them.

The reason why we reduced the allocation to 20% was to ensure that the flows coming in matched the demand that was happening in schools, as schools self-isolate. Those regions that will be having high infection rates, and therefore larger numbers of pupils self-isolating, will be getting more computers for their schools and pupils.

Q96 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I have some questions about disruption to exams but, before I do, can I ask a quick question about holidays? David Johnston asked some questions about holidays, but you will be aware of requests from some schools. I have had a couple of emails, and one letter from a local head teacher, asking for the schools to finish early this term, so that remote learning can be provided and there will be no risk to



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people of having to isolate on Christmas day itself because they will have finished two weeks early. The letter I have from the head—and other teachers from whom I have received letters—says that the remote learning they can now deliver is equal to that that would be provided in school. What is your view on that?

**Nick Gibb:** We want schools to stay open until the end of term. There is one caveat to that, which I will come to in a second. School is the best place for young people, for their educational development, for their mental health as well. The chief medical officers from all four nations are saying that the risks of being out of school far outweigh the risks of being in school. It is important that schools remain open, and 99.4% of schools are open and they have done a tremendous job—teachers, head teachers and support staff up and down the country—in keeping those schools open.

We also want to ensure that teachers and heads, in particular—they are delivering track and trace for the contacts of any pupil or staff member identified as having a positive Covid test—can have a proper break over Christmas. They have been under huge stress. I do not think some of the school senior leadership teams have had a break at all since the pandemic began. We are trying to be there—

Q97 **Chair:** Don't forget the support staff as well. They have also been doing an unbelievable amount, keeping the schools open and serving the food all the way through the pandemic, and putting their health at risk, as well as all the senior management.

**Nick Gibb:** You are quite right, and thank you for that intervention. They have worked phenomenally hard in keeping the school's hygienically safe for pupils, in particular.

We want there to be a clear six days so that, by the time we have reached Christmas eve, staff can have a proper break without having to engage in the track and trace issues. We are about to announce that inset days can be used on Friday 18 December, even if an inset day had not been originally scheduled for that day—it will mean there will be one less inset day in 2021 that might have been scheduled—so that helps to deliver those six days, and we will be saying more about that later today.

Q98 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** The Government put in some contingencies to allow for the fact that some students may not be able to sit particular exams due to ill health or other reasons. What contingency plans do the Government have in place if the number of students falling into that category is much higher than expected, in terms of getting all those tests marked, for example?

**Nick Gibb:** That is an important issue. We have deliberately spaced as many papers as we can in the summer season from 7 June to 2 July, so that if a student has to self-isolate for two weeks there is a good chance that they will have taken at least one of the papers. Then the special



considerations approach, which is a long-established procedure, for example, will help ensure that student gets a grade in that qualification.

If they miss all those papers, they will take the contingency at some point between 28 June and 16 July. You are right, the speed with which those exams can be marked and delivered on the same results day—24 August and 27 August—will depend on the volume. We are working very closely with the exam boards. Markers is an issue, regardless of how many take the contingency. It is also an issue for the main series. We are monitoring that very closely with the exam boards, and we are working with the sector to encourage more people to come forward to be markers, but you are right that, if the volume of uptake for the contingency series is very high, it will be more challenging to get those results back on results day.

**Q99 Dr Caroline Johnson:** The alternative to the contingency papers, if people were unfortunately to miss both—and I accept this will be smaller numbers—is to have a form of teacher-assessed grade that is yet to be further defined in terms of how it is produced. Would it be prudent to give teachers advice now on how they should be preparing students, so that they have the information they need rather than trying to look for information they may or may not have after the event? If so, if you do think that, when will you be providing teachers with the information they need on how to collect data on their students' performance?

**Nick Gibb:** We will announce all these details in the new year. What is clear now is that we will not be expecting schools to do anything more than they would normally do. For this very small group of students, it is a matter of having a teacher assessment based on the normal data they collect on students. The normal essays or tests that they do in school time. We do not want anything specific over and above normal coursework and normal activities.

**Q100 Dr Caroline Johnson:** What about for those who are home-educated? We are doing an inquiry at the moment into home education, and these students have particular difficulties in getting grades this year. Is there anything specifically put in place for them in the contingency planning?

**Nick Gibb:** We continue to look and work with the exam boards and schools to make sure they have access. One of the hurdles for private candidates is being able to access an exam centre—that is a school—to take their exams. We continue to investigate what more we can do to help that.

The system for 2021, with contingency papers, is better suited for private candidates than any form of teacher assessments that applied in 2020, because they do not have that relationship with the school that a pupil at the school has. The whole issue of the contingency series is beneficial to private candidates, to make sure they can get a qualification. The key thing is making sure they have a school where they can take the exam.

**Q101 Dr Caroline Johnson:** My final question is about technical qualifications.



What further consideration is the Department giving to the provision of technical qualifications, and when will that be announced?

**Nick Gibb:** As Dame Glenys touched on during her evidence session, vocational and technical qualifications are different. In a sense, they are more disparate and varied, and they have assessments during the year as well. We are working with Ofqual and with the awarding organisations to make sure that any adaptations that happen in the general qualifications—A-levels and GCSEs—do not disadvantage those students taking VTQs, particularly those VTQs that are taken instead of or in addition to GCSEs and A-levels, so that they have, where possible, the same adaptations and a similar approach to grading. That work continues, and also this issue of optionality for vocational education to make sure we can free up teaching time as well.

Q102 **Fleur Anderson:** You will have heard Dame Glenys say earlier that many teachers are, just as a contingency plan, putting together portfolios for students—all the schools I have spoken to are—which is putting a lot of pressure on students through the whole year, feeling that they are constantly being examined. What are your comments on that, and what would you say to teachers who are putting together portfolios?

**Nick Gibb:** It will be a very small number of students for whom we rely on teacher assessment. In that event, we will not be seeking that kind of portfolio. It will just be whatever evidence they normally have for students in terms of tests, essays and so on. We will not be seeking things beyond those issues that they normally have.

Q103 **Fleur Anderson:** I have two questions about funding. The first is about exam boards and funding. Ofqual has said that it is able to regulate the Government's preferred approach but also that these arrangements will put exceptional demands on exam boards with additional costs. What will be your support from the DfE to support those costs so that it can fund adequate accommodation to hold exams in a way that meets public health standards?

**Nick Gibb:** We have an exam service, as the DfE, where if a school is facing those kinds of issues with invigilators or the need for extra exam halls, they can talk to the DfE about how we can help provide some of those extra facilities. We had this service available in the autumn series, and there was quite a low uptake, probably because the numbers were quite low. That service is available for next summer as well.

Q104 **Fleur Anderson:** When will that be available so that schools will be able to know about that funding in advance—and exam boards as well with their additional costs—or will they have to put in and then not know? That will cause uncertainty for their budget.

**Nick Gibb:** We will provide further details on that in the new year.

Q105 **Fleur Anderson:** That is certainly a question the schools have been asking me about, so they can know how to plan in advance and make



sure the exams are run. They will need that funding—

**Nick Gibb:** We are providing more advice, but we provided some quite detailed advice about how the autumn series should be carried out, in terms of social distancing between desks and so on, making sure that the exam hall is secure in terms of Covid transmission. There will be similar advice coming out in relation to the summer series in 2021.

Q106 **Fleur Anderson:** My second funding question is about additional costs faced by schools generally. I have spoken to my local schools—and I know other members of this Committee have—and I have spoken to the partnership of Jewish schools across the country. The main question they have asked is about additional funding for the costs of Covid. That is for additional teachers that have needed to be brought in. This is not just catch-up funding. This is additional to their budget, because supply teachers are an enormous cost for many secondary schools, the cost of a whole extra teacher for a year. Also, for keeping classrooms clean, many schools have brought in extra cleaners and equipment. They have allocated it to a particular budget line. They can absolutely account for it, but will the Government be able to provide additional costs so they will not have to cut their budgets and claw back the money for catch-up education later?

**Nick Gibb:** We have announced a Covid workforce fund, which will help schools facing financial difficulties. The fund supplies teachers to make up for staff absences, but there is a threshold of 20% staff absence or long-term teacher absence of above 10%. Only those schools that do not have reserves can tap into it. The reserves would need to be lower than 4% of their income. This is important to protect taxpayers and all the demands on the Treasury.

We were very clear. We wanted to make sure that we were able to have year two in the Spending Review of what was a very good three-year settlement with the Treasury for school funding. We wanted to make sure that, despite all the pressures on the Treasury, that was secure for this second year and it has been agreed, which is very good news for schools. Our priority on top of that is the catch-up fund, which is £1 billion. That is a staggering sum of money—£80 for every pupil in the country. That is the £650 million and, on top of that, there is £350 million National Tutoring Programme. Those were our priorities.

We understand the pressure that schools have been under in keeping open and dealing with staff absences, and that is why we introduced the Covid workforce fund.

Q107 **Chair:** The £650 million is part of that £1 billion catch-up fund and not additional, is that correct?

**Nick Gibb:** Part of it, yes. I tried to be clear when I said that.

Q108 **Fleur Anderson:** I look forward to hearing about that funding, because schools are under pressure.



The Scottish Government have decided that National 5 qualifications—the equivalent to GCSEs—will be assessed by a combination of portfolio and teacher assessment. In Wales, GCSEs, AS-levels and A-levels will be assessed in new ways rather than predominantly by exam. There is a differential across Great Britain. Will this mean that pupils in England who will be taking exams in 2021 could be at a disadvantage when competing for university places?

**Nick Gibb:** No. The reason is that universities are used to dealing with different qualification systems. Scotland has always had a different system from England. They have had the Highers and Advanced Highers, and we have had A-levels. Also, hundreds of thousands of students come to our universities from around the world with all sorts of different qualifications that will gain them entry to those universities. They are used to assessing and understanding the different qualifications and value of those qualifications in order to assess who will be suitable for an undergraduate course in our universities.

**Q109 Fleur Anderson:** Are you having conversations with universities about the impact of the different grading, because it is beginning to look quite messy with some universities dropping their grades. This is the time when people are applying and their mocks will count for that, but they may be applying under a different syllabus or a greater syllabus than the actual exam results. Have you been talking with universities about the impact that will have? What have they been saying?

**Nick Gibb:** The officials have been talking to universities about this. The Universities Minister has as well. There are a couple of universities I have read about that have lowered their offers by one grade but, generally speaking, my understanding is that it is not the offers that change but the proportion of offers made. In every year they will distribute more offers than they have places and, given that we have given notice about what the grading will look like in 2021, that will reflect the number of offers over and above the number of places they have.

In terms of lost education, of course, we are talking to universities and colleges about what catch-up will be needed in the first year of their courses at that level, whether it is a college or university.

**Q110 Ian Mearns:** We understand that £143 million allocated to the National Tutoring Programme has not been allocated for this year. Could it not be spent in this current year to reduce the proportion that schools have to contribute themselves for purchasing extra tuition to ensure pupils are ready for their exams?

**Nick Gibb:** The National Tutoring Programme is a £350 million programme. It is spread over two academic years to make sure we have a system that is up and running, and to make sure that money is spent. There are 15,000 tutors and 33 tutoring companies evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation, and when it is fully up and running we hope to reach 250,000 students. This is one-to-one, small-group tuition, and the evidence is that such approaches are hugely effective in helping



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disadvantaged young people catch up on any lost education as a consequence of the pandemic.

**Q111 Ian Mearns:** What initial evidence do you have for how that is working, and are there any significant regional variations in recruiting the people needed to deliver this service?

**Nick Gibb:** We have a good blend of regional providers among the tutoring partners. It is available to all regions of the country, so it is very widespread.

**Q112 Ian Mearns:** Going back to Fleur's question, on the additional costs faced by schools associated with Covid-19, if schools had a little slack in their budget, to prepare for a rainy day, they might be okay. But if schools are already on a tight budget, they may well go into the next year with a deficit to claw back. In areas like ours, where an awful lot of youngsters have been sent home to isolate, sometimes on a repeated basis, there are the costs of supply cover, support staff, additional TAs, even caretakers, cleaners, kitchen staff and front office staff. All those people often need to be replaced or covered for, and it has not always been known where the money for that is coming from. It has to be done, but it has not been budgeted for in this financial year by many schools because they were already on a tight budget.

**Nick Gibb:** Leading up to the summer, between March and July, there was a fund available of up to £75,000 depending on the size of the school, for costs such as extra cleaning costs where there is a suspected case, and all those kinds of issues, such as staying open in the Easter holidays and half-terms for vulnerable children and children of critical workers, and £100 million has been distributed to schools through that fund.

For this term, as I mentioned earlier, the Covid workforce fund will help schools that are facing those financial constraints with the cost of extra supply teachers over and above a staff absence rate of 20%. That is how we are helping schools, but the key thing to remember is that we have secured a very good funding settlement for schools. It is the best in a decade, and in this current year, as a consequence of the Spending Review, we have cemented the second year of a very good settlement for schools. Some of that money should be spent on some of these extra costs.

**Q113 Ian Mearns:** Going back to your previous answer regarding the National Tutoring Programme, when that was announced was the £350 million not meant for the 2020-21 financial year?

**Nick Gibb:** We announced the figure of £350 million as part of the £1 billion. The issue for us is getting value for money from that fund. We did not want not to get value for money, and it does take time to roll out these programmes. It started in November with a few thousand students. The Education Endowment Foundation is evaluating the 33 tutoring companies and it takes time.



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Q114 **Chair:** Why announce it as being for the financial year 2020-21? Why did you not be clear at the beginning that some of it was going to be rolled over?

**Nick Gibb:** Because, as you roll out these very ambitious programmes, one is learning about how to do it and, as I said when I gave evidence last time, I was able to say more once the Spending Review had happened. It has now happened, so we can say it will be spread over the two years. It is a good thing that this programme can continue beyond this current academic year, because some of this catch-up will perhaps need to happen over a slightly longer period.

Q115 **Ian Mearns:** Schools might have started this process thinking that a certain number of cavalry were coming over the hill, only to find it is not quite as many cavalry as they thought in the first place.

**Nick Gibb:** It is a big army that is available. It is £1 billion: £650 million, £80 per pupil or £240 per pupil in special schools and special units; and then there is the £350 million National Tutoring Programme. These are very ambitious programmes that we would not have been introducing if it were not for the pandemic. I think you will find that the National Tutoring Programme will be a very successful programme.

Q116 **Chair:** If it works, do you think there will be a pot of money every year?

**Nick Gibb:** That I do not know. We will have to see what the evaluation shows. Then it is all a matter of taking a decision to do it, and then it is a matter of negotiating the funding for it.

Q117 **Ian Mearns:** In answer to an earlier question you were going to mention how many youngsters are missing from school. You said there was a global figure of 85% attendance, but that it was worse in secondary than in primary. Could you provide those figures for the Committee?

**Nick Gibb:** I can give you them now. In secondary schools, as of 3 December, the attendance rate was 81%. In primaries, as of 3 December, it was 89.5%, so you see it is lower in secondary schools than in primary.

Q118 **Ian Mearns:** That does not include the lockdown period when schools were closed for all but children of essential staff and the most vulnerable children, does it?

**Nick Gibb:** No. In the period leading up to June it was only vulnerable children and children of critical workers who could attend school. We had a worry then about the proportion of vulnerable children who were attending, which was quite low. I could give you the precise figure but it was low. We were worried about that, so our React teams, our regional teams, were working with local authorities to make sure we had contact with those children. When we closed the schools, we had contact with those children to make sure we knew the reasons why they were not attending school, to make sure they were safe and still in touch with a



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social worker. A lot of work was done in those early months to address that issue.

Q119 **Ian Mearns:** The point I am making is whether it is 81% of a shorter academic year because of that previous lockdown.

**Nick Gibb:** No, it is 81% as of that day, 3 December, just that day.

**Ian Mearns:** Just that day?

**Nick Gibb:** We get this figure every day from school.

Q120 **Ian Mearns:** In terms of the Committee being able to evaluate how much learning has been lost, a picture of what has been happening in this academic year since September, and in the previous academic year from, say, Easter up to the summer break, might give us a better idea of what is happening. Of course, there will be significant regional variations in those figures. That is the global figure for the whole of England.

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, and those figures should be available. In the middle of this month, the 15th, we will publish more regional breakdowns of attendance figures, and I think we will backdate those to the beginning of September.

Q121 **Chair:** To reiterate, I am not clear why you do not specifically get the data for exam-year students. That would surely give you a picture, especially given we know that in different parts of the country there are more students away than in others. If you had the exam years, you would be able to guide your policy accordingly.

**Nick Gibb:** As I said, it is a matter of judgment. We have added more things to collect from schools, and it is difficult. We will take it away and have another think about it, but it is about the burden on schools and, given that we know the secondary attendance is 81%, you can make an assumption about how that applies to the exam year.

Q122 **Chair:** Surely there is a way of tracking every student in an exam year, working with the local authorities and the academies to find out, if they are off school, what kind of learning they are doing. Surely the schools or the local authorities could give you that information, so you would get a proper picture of what learning has been lost and how much catch-up is needed.

**Nick Gibb:** As I said earlier, our regional teams and regional schools commissioners will have more qualitative information.

Q123 **Chair:** They will not know either how many students in exam years—

**Nick Gibb:** They will not have the quantitative figure, but they talk to schools every day. There are big teams in each regional area, so we will know which schools have particular issues with self-isolation.

Q124 **Chair:** I would be grateful. I cannot see why it would not be a sensible policy to look directly at the exam years because then you will know what



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needs to be done, especially given that your committee is not going to report until spring. You can make adjustments if you know that students in certain areas are missing school and how many of them are doing GCSEs or A-levels next year.

**Nick Gibb:** I will take that away, and I will put it to officials.

Q125 **Chair:** Would you be able to write to us about it?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, I can do that. We have these committees that have representatives on them per sector. We will talk to them about it and see whether it is something we can do. We know there has been disruption and that the disruption varies across the country. We know where it is at the maximum, because our regional teams talk to those schools, and we know what is at the minimum, very little. Everything we announced last week is designed to reflect that disparate approach to things.

Q126 **Chair:** Can I ask you about remote learning? You confirmed a number of measures in terms of remote learning: the three hours in primary school, four hours and so on. You also said that your guidance says that schools should devise systems for checking at least weekly how engaged remote pupils are with their learning, and should inform parents where there are concerns about engagement, but that stance appears to have softened. It was reported initially that schools would ideally have daily contact with remote learners, and that was reported in the trade press. Have you watered down the remote learning requirements for schools?

**Nick Gibb:** I do not know where that particular story came from, but when we produce this guidance we talk and consult informally with people who have to deliver it on the ground, and that is why the wording is as it is. We think that is the way of making sure there is feedback but also making sure we take into account the real pressures that schools are under.

Q127 **Chair:** Was the guidance initially that schools should have daily contact with remote learners?

**Nick Gibb:** I have spent hours going over different versions of them as they are consulted on and drafted. I cannot remember whether there was a version that said "daily" but, if you like, we will go back and check that. These stories get into the trade press regularly. They get in, particularly, as we consult widely on issues, so all kinds of opinions could have been expressed during that consultation.

Q128 **Chair:** Just a final couple of questions. The Government came out with some very good announcements in terms of child food hunger and the holiday activities programme that were very welcome. First, does the holiday activities programme include education as well as wellbeing, sports and other activities?

**Nick Gibb:** I think in the original programme there are educational activities, but do not forget that this is holiday time and I am not sure how well students would react to sitting down and—



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Q129 **Chair:** The reason I mention that is because I saw a holiday activities programme in my constituency organised by Essex Council at Passmores School. They had a STEM academy going in and the children were learning. Amazingly, children on free school meals were volunteering to come in to do a few hours a day of physics and other science subjects. Different groups were also doing sports and wellbeing activities. If you are going to make the most of this, you should have all three—education, wellbeing and sports—as well as obviously providing food for hungry children.

**Nick Gibb:** That is why it is activities and not just the other aspects of the fund. There is a lot of discretion in how this is developed. We know that, over the summer months, children lose a lot of the things they have learned in the previous weeks. They catch up pretty swiftly in the autumn term, but there is definitely a loss of education in those summer periods, so any activities like the ones you describe would be extremely welcome within the holiday activities programme.

Q130 **Chair:** Is that something you would encourage, education as well as mental health, wellbeing and sports?

**Nick Gibb:** Absolutely.

Q131 **Chair:** Do you agree that breakfast clubs make a difference to attainment, and that all the evidence suggests children who do breakfast clubs get two months' additional attainment compared to those who do not? Are you supportive of that?

**Nick Gibb:** I am, yes. I think children work better when they are not hungry.

Q132 **Chair:** The child food hunger programme you announced a few weeks ago was, as I said, really welcome. Will you be investing in expanding Magic Breakfast clubs and other breakfast clubs to more schools in disadvantaged areas?

**Nick Gibb:** Let me write to you about the details of that after this Committee hearing.

Q133 **Chair:** In principle, is it something that you would support? The Government are looking at expanding the funding of Magic Breakfast clubs.

**Nick Gibb:** The Government have been supporters of that programme and, as I said earlier, I think children work better in the school environment if they do not come to school hungry and if they have a good meal at lunchtime as well.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. You will be pleased to know that we are now finished. As I said at the beginning, I cannot thank you enough for being a Minister who always comes to our Committee ready to take some difficult questions across the board and comes probably more often than any other Minister in the Department, so it is hugely appreciated. I wish



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you from all of us a very happy Christmas and a happy new year as well.