

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [The impact of Covid-19 on education and children's services](#), HC 254

Tuesday 9 March 2021

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

Questions 1256 - 1349

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards, Department for Education; Ian Bauckham, Acting Chair, Ofqual; and Simon Lebus, Acting Chief Regulator, Ofqual.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Nick Gibb, Ian Bauckham and Simon Lebus.

Q1256 **Chair:** Good morning, everybody. Welcome to this important session on exams, Ofqual and assessment. Could I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves and their titles very briefly for the benefit of those watching on Parliament TV?

Simon Lebus: Simon Lebus, interim chief regulator at Ofqual.

Ian Bauckham: Ian Bauckham, interim chair of Ofqual.

Nick Gibb: Nick Gibb, Minister of State for School Standards.

Q1257 **Chair:** Under the initial plans for 2021, the Government said they would allow more generous grading than usual in line with the national outcomes from 2020.

The proportion of year 11 pupils who were awarded grade 4 or above rose by around 9.7 percentage points in GCSE English language. The proportion of A or A* grades at A-level 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. Ofqual said at the time such differences in student attainment are hard to explain. We know that there is scope for grade inflation. They were already artificially high last summer.

Given that there is no mechanism to peg grade distribution to 2020 or before, or even between 2019 and 2020, and no system-wide attempt to suppress inflation at its source, do you accept that this year's results are likely to be inflated even more than last year's results? How high could inflation get in 2021?

Nick Gibb: You are talking about what we said as exams were going to take place. We said with regard to teacher-assessed grades for 2021 that the standard to which teachers should assess their students' work should be based on previous years. That will be the standard they are used to. They know what a B looks like. They know what a grade 5 looks like for GCSE and so on. That should be the standard they have in mind.

An enormous amount of guidance is going to be issued by the exam boards about how to assess a grade, grade descriptors and so on. Past paper questions will be available in the exam materials teachers will be able to use.

Quality assurance processes will be in place at the school level. The exam boards will conduct a 100% check that those quality assurance processes are in place, including sign-off by the head teacher. Once the grades have been submitted, there will be another quality assurance process on a sample basis by the exam boards, and a risk sample basis as well.



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There is a huge amount of scaffolding to help the teachers, including training from the exam boards, so that there is consistency and assistance.

On generosity, if you imagine a geography class of 30 students, the teacher may well take the view that six of them were very capable of achieving grade 9 or grade 8. In a normal year, of that six, perhaps four will end up getting a 9 or an 8 and the other two might get a 7 or a 6. But of course, when the teacher is making their assessment, they will not know which of those six will not have as good a day as they thought on the exam day, so they will inevitably submit top grades for all six. Therefore, overall, you will end up with more generous grading than you would in a normal year, but the standard against which the work is being judged will be based on the standard in previous years.

Q1258 **Chair:** How high could inflation get in 2021?

Nick Gibb: That is not a judgment for me. You might like to ask my colleagues from Ofqual. My point is we have put in place everything we can. The best system, Robert, as you know, is for students to take exams. That is the fairest system and the best system, but that is not possible this year. It would not be fair this year, given all the disruption, so we have to have—

Chair: No one is arguing about that. People were just asking questions about the system.

Nick Gibb: Good. It is never going to be perfect.

Q1259 **Chair:** Absolutely, but people like Sir Jon Coles, who I am going to come on to in a minute, are asking about the system you have devised. No one is arguing that there should not be centre-assessed grades, given what has happened, but—

Nick Gibb: Yes, we have put it in place. We consulted very widely on the approach we are taking and had 100,000 responses. A lot of work went into devising the best system possible to ensure grades are properly assessed based on standards in previous years and that they are fairly and consistently awarded.

Q1260 **Chair:** Where does recycling the inflation end? Which year group will now accept a return to normal, given that they will be competing for jobs with the beneficiaries of inflation the year before? Are we starting to bake in inflation for quite a few years to come? Does the Department have a plan for a transition back to normal?

Nick Gibb: That goes back to the quote you started this series of questions with. When exams were going to be held in 2021, we were very concerned about fairness and we still remain concerned about fairness between year groups. We do need to make sure that there is fairness. But what we achieved in 2010 and 2011 by eliminating grade inflation from the exam system was remarkable and we want to get back to that.



How we get from here to that point is a piece of work the Department will be carrying out once we have settled 2021. Of course, we are now thinking very seriously about 2022.

Q1261 **Chair:** Why was it necessary for the Secretary of State to write a letter that was described as a direction to Ofqual? Which things in that letter would Ofqual not have been able to do if not directed?

Nick Gibb: There has to be a direction in that letter. Officials and Ministers worked very closely with Ofqual as we put in place an alternative to exams. Those officials worked very closely together in the autumn and also since the announcement that we were not going to go ahead with exams. Those letters go back and forth. They are drafted in conjunction with Ofqual and, indeed, the draft response from Ofqual is also considered carefully by DfE.

Q1262 **Chair:** Why did it need to be a directive? Just answer the specific part of my previous question.

Nick Gibb: Because of the statutory remit of Ofqual, it is required to have that directive because it is required to maintain standards year on year, between subjects and, indeed, internationally as well. To deal with that, you will probably get a more definitive answer from Simon, not me.

Q1263 **Chair:** Could I ask one of the Ofqual representatives, please? I want to understand. You obviously back the approach to assessment this year. Is the approach sound purely from a technical perspective and did you raise any reservations, such as on the variability and lack of consistency regarding methods of assessment or the lack of robust quality assurance?

Simon Lebus: We explained in our correspondence, prior to the direction, that we expected outcomes to be different this year because a different approach is being adopted. The question is how robust and how consistent we can make the approach. A lot of that is to do with the quality assurance mechanisms, the training we or the exam boards provide to schools, the scaffolding and support material that exists, the deployment of past papers and sample examples, mark schemes and so on.

It is not the same as exams. We pointed that out in my first bit of correspondence referring back to earlier correspondence that took place last year, but in the circumstances and recognising that the pandemic makes the conduct of a normal exam session impossible, it is a good set of arrangements that I hope will provide a robust and sensible platform for giving everybody the grades they are entitled to this year.

Q1264 **Chair:** Can I ask you about the spot checks? There is considerable variation in the way schools and colleges will assess their pupils, which may not get picked up across the whole sector. Schools and colleges will be under pressure from parents to mark generously. There may be an incentive for teachers to lean towards the generous side. Schools only need to confirm to exam boards that their pupils have completed the



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minimum amount of content required for them to progress to the next phase of education. It might be tempting just to teach to that minimum point and focus on getting better grades. Is that a possibility?

Simon Lebus: The system is based on professional judgment and on the idea that people will behave professionally. There has been a huge amount of lost learning, so there is a huge gap to recover. The assessment arrangements should not interfere with that.

The idea is that teachers will be able to use a variety of sources of evidence to make their grading judgments. Some of that may be work that has already been done, but some of it will be work they set and use in connection with the rest of the academic year. That should provide a broad base for arriving at a judgment.

Of course, it is possible people will not teach the entirety of the syllabus, but everybody recognises the importance of recovering the learning that has been lost and this provides a mechanism for integrating the assessment in that process in a minimally intrusive way that will support further learning.

Q1265 **Chair:** Nick, if you wanted to devise an exam grading system that makes life simpler for the Government in the short term without thinking about the longer-term consequences for this cohort—their ability to keep up as they move to the next stage of education, the likelihood of dropouts, competition for further and higher education places, employer confidence, teacher-assessed grades without controls to tackle inflation at its source—would this be the system you would devise?

In opting for this system, it is a dodge tactic. I know when you came to our Committee a few weeks ago, you quoted E. D. Hirsch. Is this an “all must have prizes” approach to exam grades? You have transmogrified from E. D. Hirsch to “all must have prizes.”

Nick Gibb: No. This is a system where we trust the professionalism of teachers. They are the people who know their students well. You can ask Ian and Simon about the correlation there was last year with centre-assessed grades and previous rank orders. This is a sensible system. As Simon said, it is very well scaffolded with support for teachers in making those judgments.

We are concerned about making sure young people can move on to the next phase of their education. One of the reasons, for example, we put the date for submission of the grades to 18 June was that we wanted there to be the maximum amount of teaching time available from the announcement of this alternative system until those grades are submitted so young people can continue to study the subject that the exam and the qualification is meant to assess.

Q1266 **Chair:** Has the Department assessed how much inaccurate assessment and reporting it is likely to miss as a result of opting for spot checks? Have you done any analysis on the proportion of schools and colleges



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that will be covered by the spot-checking sample?

Nick Gibb: That will depend on resource and time. There is always a balance. There will be a 100% sample check of the internal quality assurance processes of schools to make sure they are in place and then there will be a risk-based sample. If the array of grades submitted is very significantly out of kilter with the grades submitted in the past, it will lead to a conversation, not necessarily any adjustment—

Q1267 **Chair:** How many schools are you going to spot check?

Nick Gibb: That is not a matter for me. That will be a matter for the exam boards.

Q1268 **Chair:** Okay, I will ask the exam board. How many schools?

Simon Lebus: There are 6,000 schools, and it will be the exam boards' responsibility to administer a system of spot checks or random sampling as well as more targeted checks based on—

Q1269 **Chair:** How many are you asking for, minimum?

Simon Lebus: We have not asked for a minimum at this stage because we are still consulting. There is a technical consultation going on, and we will be completing the guidelines by the end of this month.

Q1270 **Chair:** Are you confident that the sample size is sufficient to make sure there is consistency between the schools?

Simon Lebus: The discussions we are having about designing and agreeing the sample size will be designed to procure precisely that.

Q1271 **Chair:** At the moment, you cannot say how many schools are going to be spot-checked?

Simon Lebus: No, because we have to agree. There are three layers to the quality assurance mechanisms.

The first layer is that schools and centres will have to complete some quite detailed quality assurance protocols as to what they are doing internally. That will involve record keeping. It will require information on the data being used. It will require information about the mechanisms they have used internally such as having heads of departments sign off on individual teachers' grades and heads of centre signing off heads of departments' activity and monitoring what their teachers are doing. There will also be a requirement that the centre looks at performance over the previous two years and, if it is anomalously out of line, it is explained and rationalised, as the Minister mentioned.

There is a rigorous first level that every school has to complete. The exam boards will have an opportunity to look at that. If they feel it is not satisfactory—if, for example, there is not very much use of externally set tasks, the sources of information used are unusual or there are peculiar profiles of attainment between the different sources and the different



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marks being given for various bits of work—that would highlight there is a risk to that centre, which might identify that it should be looked at in more detail. There will also be a random sampling process.

There is quite an elaborate set of arrangements that are going to be put in place. We are in the process of discussing that and consulting on it with the exam boards. It will be reasonably resource intensive. I am satisfied that it will be fairly extensive and it will do the job it is designed to do, which will create incentives for people and actors within the system to behave in an appropriate way despite the onerousness.

Q1272 Chair: I have a couple more questions before I bring in some colleagues. I noticed that you do not want algorithms. Sir Jon Coles makes the point that you based everything around not having an algorithm rather than what necessarily is the best grading system for students. Why has the Department not opted for a more system-wide method of quality assuring more or even all schools? That would have controlled grade inflation at the source.

For example, you could have had an army of volunteers, retired teachers and Ofsted inspectors, perhaps including some of the individuals who would have been involved had exams gone ahead, going into the schools and providing a check and a balance as teachers are assessing those grades.

Nick Gibb: The problem is none of those people know the students in the way the teachers do. If you move into a teacher-assessed system, which we have decided to do, the teacher has to make that judgment.

The teacher is being provided with very clear and detailed guidance about how to make that judgment. They will need a range of evidence: a mock that might have been taken at some point, essays, coursework, tests in class, as well as the option of using the exam material and the question bank to provide another source of evidence. They have to do that. That then has to be signed off by the head teacher. That process has to be checked by the exam board that it is happening in every school. Then there is the external layer with the random sample checks of the actual grades submitted and the risk-based sample checks.

When you combine all that with the grade descriptors provided by the exam boards, and then the marking schemes and the examples of work from the exam materials, you can see that the teacher is very well supported in how they come up with the grades. They can be assured that the school down the road is also following the same processes. Every incentive is being built into the system to support the teacher in taking a very professional judgment.

Q1273 Chair: Why not have, to really cement this, some sort of consistent standard when it comes to what teachers assess? You could have made some mini papers mandatory in core subjects like maths and English, with necessary adjustments to volume and options so that even schools



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that have missed a lot of teaching time are able to cover it. Did the Department consider some sort of externally set assessment to ensure a more consistent standard across schools and colleges? Why did this not feature in the end?

Nick Gibb: We thought about all options. A huge amount of work took place last year and this year to work out how best to replace the actual exams.

The problem with the approach you are taking is that the more consistency there is in the materials supplied to teachers, you run up against the very unfairness that led to the decision to cancel exams in the first place. The reason we have cancelled exams is not because we are worried about students going into exam halls. We can make those Covid secure, as we did in the autumn series. We cancelled them because of fairness and—

Q1274 **Chair:** That goes back to the “all must have prizes” approach. If a child has not done any learning or very little learning—minimal, as you describe—surely there should be other mechanisms to help that child. You should not necessarily apply that principle to everybody. That is what you have done. You have created an “all must have prizes” exam approach.

Nick Gibb: No, we have not. By “minimum”, we do not mean “minimal.” There has to be sufficient coverage of the curriculum to allow progression. Do not forget that these students started their course in September 2019. The closure of schools did not happen until March 2020. There has been time, and there is now time between March and June as well. There will be coverage of the curriculum.

The issue is that there will be students in parts of the country with high infection rates that, even in that period of September to December, may have had to self-isolate more often than students in other parts of the country with lower infection rates. Dealing with that unfairness led to the decision to cancel exams.

Teachers are assessing their students on what they have been taught, not on what they have not been taught.

Q1275 **Chair:** To quote Jon Coles, a very successful and important figure in education, “If ‘no algorithm’ is taken to mean ‘no use of past data’ and ‘no exams by the back door’ to mean ‘no common assessment taken under standard conditions’, then we really are lost. There is no respected jurisdiction-wide testing system which does not every year make use of both.” He is not somebody who would want to ignore those children who have had minimum learning, as you describe. Could you comment on what he says?

Nick Gibb: Yes. He is a distinguished educationalist—

Chair: Most people would have said, in previous days, that the old Nick



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Gibb would have been on his side.

Nick Gibb: I am still on his side in many ways, but there are many opinions about how we put in an alternative to exams. There are 100,000 opinions, indeed. There were 100,000 people who responded to the consultation. There was overwhelming support for the approach that together with Ofqual in a joint—

Q1276 **Chair:** Did you consult specifically with small businesses and business organisations, not just the CBI but across the board, to see what employers thought of it all?

Nick Gibb: Yes, officials have consulted with businesses.

Q1277 **Chair:** Did you have any meetings with businesses?

Nick Gibb: I did not, no, but officials did. My concern was making sure we have a detailed and right response to—

Q1278 **Chair:** Yes, but you need the employers to make sure they value the currency of the exams.

Nick Gibb: Yes, and their views fed into our thinking and how we approached this.

Q1279 **Chair:** My very final question is on SATs. There will be, again, no consistent baseline for secondary schools to measure progress in future years with no SAT exam results. Could there be a national baseline assessment for year 7 pupils that secondary schools could administer?

Nick Gibb: That will be very much for the schools to decide. We will be making decisions in due course about the consequences for Progress 8 in terms of those students who have not had SATs. We will have more to say about that as we address those issues.

My approach to all these very challenging intellectual issues we have to address is to deal with them step by step in great detail so that we have the right answers to each of those problems. We have dealt with 2021 in a very thorough way with close working with the Ofqual officials, very able people working together collaboratively. They have come up with a good solution to a very challenging problem. Now we will be working on 2022.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in my colleagues. Thank you for the patience of my esteemed colleagues.

Q1280 **David Johnston:** My question is to Nick. We have a lot more questions about the detail of this year, but a concern I have is that some people are using the past two years of no exams to suggest that now is the time to not use exams and to use teacher assessments, at least at GCSE, which would be bad for the poorest children most of all.

Can you confirm there is no thinking, planning or view in the Department that this could become a permanent fixture of how we assess children



and young people?

Nick Gibb: I absolutely can confirm that. We have learned that exams are the fairest way of judging the attainment, ability and work of students. We want to get back to exams as soon as possible.

If you recall, right up until 4 January, we were planning on having exams this year, in 2021, and we had put in place a range of measures to tackle the differential learning and disruption that students had faced up to that point. We wanted to go ahead with exams. It was only after the decision to close schools to most pupils from January that we decided the unfairness was too great for those methods to compensate for it and we had to go to teacher assessment. In the long term, we want exams back because they are fairer.

There has been some debate about GCSEs. GCSEs are an excellent way of making sure students cover a broad and balanced curriculum. The GCSE specifications are well structured. It is a gold-standard qualification both in Britain and internationally. I disagree wholeheartedly with those who say that GCSEs have had their day.

Q1281 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Minister, I want to ask about the next few months and the production of evidence you have described. You are hoping that the next couple of months give teachers an opportunity to teach the gaps in learning that have been missed. Surely the incentive is not to teach the bits of the curriculum that have not been taught but to continue to ask the children to produce essays and do tests so that the best results from these can be selected to provide evidence to the exam board, which may not mean they learn very much but will get them the best grades.

How do you prevent that? If you end up with huge numbers of children getting really high grades because they have selected evidence that is not typical of the child's progress but gives evidence that the child can, at times, achieve that particular standard, how would you be able to identify which children have produced typical work for assessment and which have produced very selected items for assessment?

Nick Gibb: My experience of teachers in this country is that they are very professional people. We owe a huge debt of gratitude for everything they have achieved during this very difficult period for schools and teachers during this time, teaching remotely and teaching in person for vulnerable children and critical workers' children, as well as keeping the schools Covid secure. They have done a remarkable job since March 2020. Our starting point is that we trust the professionalism of teachers.

We have also put in place, as I said earlier, very rigorous scaffolding and protections so that the teacher is incentivised to put in the right grade and also so that they know the school down the road and the other schools in the country are also subject to those same internal quality assurance checks, sample-based checks and risk-based checks from the exam boards after the grades are submitted. They know that there is no



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point in fabricating or trying to create evidence to demonstrate a grade that does not truly reflect a student's ability, because that will lead to those quality assurances kicking in. If they cannot demonstrate a child has achieved that standard, the exam boards will be asking questions.

I do not recognise the motive of teachers not to want to teach the elements of the curriculum they have not yet covered in the period between now and 18 June, because they want to make sure students can progress to the next stage of their careers. Of course, they only assess what has been taught but they also have to assure the exam boards that the quantity of what has been taught is sufficient for progression. There is every incentive to continue teaching the curriculum that has not yet been covered.

Simon Lebus: Schools collect a lot of data about their students and student progression over a long period of time. Suddenly finding a situation where all the students are outperforming against the data collected over the past two years or 18 months would flag quality assurance alarm signals. Finding a cohort that is behaving in a way completely different from what all the data that has been collected on their performance to date suggests would flag attention from an exam board.

Ian Bauckham: Speaking with both hats I am wearing today, as chair of Ofqual and as a teacher and head teacher, every teacher knows that the best way to perform well in formal assessments is to be taught more and to learn more. Doing vacuous practice of assessments without using the time to teach classes and for pupils to learn more is ultimately a waste of time. All teachers recognise that does pupils a disservice because they end up with qualifications that do not actually reflect their learning at the relevant point in time and may end up, as a consequence, in destinations to which they are not suited. I share my colleagues' view that teachers understand that very well and can be trusted to act with integrity in that way.

Q1282 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I was not suggesting at all that anyone would act without integrity. I am concerned there is going to be pressure on students and teachers to produce these pieces of evidence, rather than working on the curriculum instead.

What Simon said is quite reassuring. It looks like you are going to be looking at evidence over a year or two rather than immediately prior to the exams, although that may be seen to disadvantage some students. We know that some young boys, in particular, often outperform the initial expectation in exams.

Simon Lebus: I emphasise that the arrangements give the teacher discretion as to the evidence to use when making a recommendation about a grade. They would be able to use both previous data but also data they accumulate for the rest of the academic year. It gives them quite a lot of discretion and flexibility to make sure they are reflecting the



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totality of the student's achievement over the course of the curriculum and over the course of the two years they have been learning. It does give them the opportunity, if somebody is very late, to give a bit more emphasis to what happens later in the course. If somebody has done a lot of early work and has banked some good work, it can also be taken into account.

Q1283 Ian Mearns: I have a number of questions, but there is one I have been thinking about in terms of the exchanges we have just had.

Minister, you have been saying that until 4 January you were insisting that exams were the fairest and most accurate way to measure a pupil's attainment. Of course, that is probably right in most years, but this year it was despite the significant differentials in lost learning between schools and between different areas of the country because of the impact of the pandemic. That insistence on the fairness of exams may well erode—and probably has eroded—parents' trust in teachers' judgment on assessment.

Now that grades will be determined by teacher assessment and not exams this year, what are you and the Department doing to reassure that vital parental trust in our teachers' judgment on assessment? It is a big exercise in terms of reinforcing the model and also reinforcing the trust in teachers' assessment, because of what happened last year in particular.

Nick Gibb: On the exam point, we have put in place a package of measures to help to make those exams fair, given the very different experiences students will have had across the country. That is why we were going to preannounce the topics that were going to be covered in the exam. That was a method of dealing with that unfairness. When we were going to close schools again for most students from 4 and 5 January, it became overwhelming and we had to take a different approach.

Parents can be reassured by all the measures I have described: the quality assurance processes, the grade descriptors, the training from the exam boards and so on. This will be the best alternative to exams that can be devised. Officials—me and others—have worked with senior officials at Ofqual to devise this. We consulted very widely on these proposals and 100,000 people responded, including parents and 50,000 student candidates. We have come up with the best alternative to exams that anybody could have thought up.

Simon Lebus: I make the observation that teacher judgment generally is able to be demonstrated to be pretty reliable. If you superimpose teachers' rank orders over exam results, generally there is a pretty good correlation. The challenge lies in allowing teachers to internalise the standard being applied generally. Normally, you can do that through the mechanism of exams. We have a lot of criticism in a normal year of teachers teaching to the test and so on. Teachers are very well versed in understanding the standard.



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This year, the approach is rather different partly because of the disruption to learning caused by the pandemic, which means that not everybody has learned the same amount of content, and partly because we are relying solely on teacher judgment. The idea is that rather than having exams that provide a standardisation mechanism, we have the scaffolding that exam boards will provide in the form of externally set tasks, mark schemes, answers from previous years, and so on. Teachers will be operating in a well-defined context and they will have good support and a good understanding of the benchmark standard against which they are assessing.

We have to recognise that it is not as hard and fast as it would be in a normal year. We have created a system in which there are good incentives to allow teacher judgment to flourish. We all have to play our part to support that.

I fully agree with your comment and your observation about the communication needed to support that. It is also very important that parents give teachers the space to do it, because it is always a worry that parents get terribly involved and teachers feel uncomfortable with the intrusive interest. That is an important point, and I wholly agree with it.

Q1284 Ian Mearns: It is not enough for the Minister, with all respect to him, to say parents can have every confidence. If confidence has been undermined, there is a process that needs to be done to rebuild that confidence and to make sure parents know their youngsters are going into a situation this year that they can have confidence in. There is a catalogue of people who are still expressing discomfort with what occurred last year as well.

Ian Bauckham: I briefly want to draw some comparisons with last year, if I may. Although it has rightly been observed that there was inflation from 2019 to 2020 at both GCSE and A-level, the distribution of grades—the so-called centre-assessed grades, the CAGs, that were eventually awarded last year—was more or less exactly the same shape as it normally is, albeit a little higher. The correlation between the overall CAGs that were awarded and individual students' past attainment was as tight, if not slightly tighter, as it is in normal years.

I am saying all that because it reinforces the point that teacher judgment can work and can be trusted. As you rightly say, Mr Mearns, we need to rebuild parental confidence in that judgment while putting in place all the systems of scaffolding, support, training and quality assurance to hold any inflationary pressures in check, which were not in place at all last year. Teachers made those judgments with very little support and guidance because of the timescale we were operating to, but the overall shape and the correlation with prior attainment were actually very strong.

Q1285 Ian Mearns: My next question is for the record. Simon and Ian, can you confirm that Ofqual is content with the Government's decision for awarding grades this summer and that complying with the Secretary of



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State's direction will not be at odds with Ofqual's responsibility to maintain confidence in the qualifications you regulate, now and in future years? Are you still independent when operating under direction?

Simon Lebus: Yes, we are. The nature of the arrangements is that we have to get a direction to change the regulatory framework, but one of our statutory responsibilities is maintaining public confidence in the exam system. Public confidence would not be maintained if we were simply to say, "There is a pandemic on. Students cannot get grades this year." We have had to come up with alternative arrangements. These seem to be the best possible set of arrangements in the circumstances, and that seems to be a suitable execution of Ofqual's responsibilities.

Q1286 **Tom Hunt:** Caroline touched on this. A number of pupils are going to be disadvantaged by the fact that there are no exams. There are many pupils for whom exams play to their strengths. Caroline mentioned boys. A lot of these pupils have special educational needs. They are often unconventional learners, and classroom-based assessments do not work so well for them as exams.

I am interested in the non-mandatory tests. If a particular pupil felt they were really missing out by not having an exam, could they put in a request to the teacher to say, "I know we are not having exams, but I would really benefit from having a non-mandatory test to at least feed into my eventual assessment"? Does it have to be the whole class either doing a test or not doing a test, or the whole school either doing a test or not doing a test? Could the teacher say, "It would be helpful for these pupils to take part in a test but maybe not these ones"? I am slightly concerned about that.

Simon Lebus: Other things being equal, you would want evidence used to be gathered on a consistent basis, but the arrangements provide for multiple data points to be used by a teacher in making the grade judgments. It would be evidence collected over a period of time.

The arrangements also provide that the schools share information with students about what evidence has been used as the basis for the grade judgment before the recommendations are sent to the awarding body on 18 June. As a consequence, there is an opportunity for a student to say if they think that the evidence being used does not accurately reflect the best of their ability and for them to say, "That is not fair. We should have used other evidence. I would like to have been tested."

Given that check exists at the end of the process, it is clearly likely that teachers are going to think carefully about students with different needs. If there are different needs that require an exceptional approach, they would probably try to make sure that was organised well in advance.

We have talked about creating a system with incentives. We have a system with incentives, flexibility and discretion, but we cannot provide for that in detail. The overall design of the system provides for the fact



that learners have a lot of different styles and different approaches, and it caters for teachers to be able to support that.

Q1287 Tom Hunt: If I were a head teacher and I had a class that had some pupils with learning disabilities, some without, some with different needs, would I have the ability to say, "I am going to have a test for some and not for others," or does that decision need to be for a whole class or a whole school?

Ian Bauckham: All other things being equal, as my colleague said, it is easier for teachers to arrive at consistent grading for a particular class if broadly the same evidence base is used, but the guidance will admit exceptions to that.

I have a lot of sympathy for the point Mr Hunt is making. Every year, teachers teaching exam classes—as I have done for many years—get a nice surprise in August when a student whom they did not realise was making as much progress as they were delivers a very positive exam result. We want the scope for nice surprises to exist this year as well.

We will be asking boards to make it clear when they communicate with schools in guidance that there should be flexibility around the edges with pupils for whom it may be appropriate to use different portfolios of evidence, which may include more in-class or other kinds of tests to leave open the possibility of delivering a nice surprise.

It is particularly the case at the moment. At least when schools are open teachers see students every day, see how they are learning and see what progress they are making usually, although, as I said, there can be surprises. At the moment, we are just coming back to school today, and apologies if you hear the happy sound of young people returning to school around me. Students have been visible only through little icons on screen for the last seven weeks. Who knows? Some of those pupils might have been working hard.

Tom Hunt: Thank you very much. That is very reassuring.

Q1288 Ian Mearns: All of this says to me that it is a shame we got rid of coursework as part of the overall assessment.

Nick Gibb: No, we do not design an exam system for pandemics. The reason we got rid of coursework was because there was evidence that there was not that synoptic knowledge that comes from being examined on a whole course at one point. It also led to multiple resits and retakes, and a huge amount of time was being absorbed by preparing for and taking exams. Having this end-of-course exam after two years is a much better system to ensure the knowledge is embedded with those students.

Ian Mearns: I am not convinced that the other two panellists completely agree with that. I am not certain, but there we go.

Q1289 Chair: Nick, you just said that the idea of having external assessors



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come in—retired teachers, recently retired Ofsted inspectors and others—to check and balance would not work because only teachers know how to grade their students. Does that not contradict what you just said? One minute you say you trust the teachers to do everything, and the next minute you say people who come in cannot be trusted to moderate those grades, yet you are going to have spot checks with anonymous people checking those grades.

Nick Gibb: You are comparing apples with pears. If you have exams, then of course you can have external markers and so on marking those exams, but we took a decision that this year, because of the pandemic and the disruption, exams would not be fair. Then we revert to teacher assessment and, of course, it is only the teachers who really know the students well enough to make a teacher assessment. An external marker coming in will not be able to assess the pupil in the same way as a teacher, because they really do not know that pupil as well.

Q1290 **Chair:** They can check and balance and look at the grades from previous years and the grades that they—

Nick Gibb: That is happening. That approach is happening—

Chair: Only in a spot-check kind of way.

Nick Gibb: No, there is a 100% check to make sure that the school has those internal quality assurance processes in place. All schools will be checked. Then there is the sample check and the risk-based sample checks when the grades have been submitted.

Q1291 **Chair:** The quality assurance check is before you have those things.

Nick Gibb: Yes.

Chair: Yes. I am talking about the after, not the before.

Nick Gibb: After, there will be sample-based checking and a risk-based sample check.

Q1292 **Chair:** You are happy to have sample-based checking of people who do not know the pupils, even though there are going to be limited samples, it seems, but that is better than external assessors going into schools, discussing with the teachers, looking at the grades and providing a check and balance?

Nick Gibb: Yes. Also, there is a huge resource implication of what you are suggesting. We do not want this to become a major industry. The focus of the time between now and 18 June should be on teaching, not on going through a massive process of assessment with individuals travelling around the country and going into schools. That is not the ideal solution to this problem.

Chair: It would have helped to stop potential grade inflation.

Q1293 **David Simmonds:** Bridging two points that the Minister made at the



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start and Simon just touched on is the issue around the minimum standards. We have been concerned that Ofqual is not setting minimum requirements for the assessment of content in each subject.

I take the point that there will be varying degrees of disruption and, therefore, varying degrees of content that has been covered. I am interested in how that then leads to our tackling the issue of perceived unfairness when you have one student who may have completed a very small amount of work to a relatively high standard and another student who may have a much larger body of work prepared that they can offer in evidence. It seems to the Committee and to colleagues that it would be critical to do that to maintain confidence, as far as we can, in the outcome of the grades. I am interested in the strategy around that, given the hugely different levels of content that would have been taught from school to school.

Nick Gibb: We moved to teacher assessment because there has been that differential experience for students up and down the country. They will have been taught different amounts of the curriculum, and that is why having an exam system that tests the whole curriculum in a sample way would not be fair.

However, we have also said that there needs to be a minimum coverage of the curriculum to provide progression on the basis of that qualification to the next phase. This combines requirements of a certain minimum of content covered—and that will not be a minimal content—that has to be sufficient to allow progression and that is a matter for the judgment of the teacher, but very strongly advised with guidance from the exam boards. This is the fairest approach to ensuring that young people have the grades and qualifications to carry on with their careers.

Of course, they will have covered a significant part of the curriculum because, from September 2019 to March 2020, schools were operating in a normal way. We then had the lockdown between March and July, and schools put in place remote education. That varied between schools. It got better as the weeks went by. Then, from September to December, schools were open but many students will have suffered varying requirements to self-isolate as a consequence of differing infection rates. Again, very high-quality remote education was in place in the autumn term up and down the country. Now, of course, students are back from 8 March. There is plenty of time and scope with remote education and students being in the classroom for them to have covered that minimum quantity of the curriculum to allow progression.

Q1294 **David Simmonds:** We will come on to the issue of appeals. A concern I have is that, if there is no minimum requirement, how can we be confident that the appeals will be based on at least some kind of consistent standard? For young people who are unhappy with the outcome of a teacher assessment—and we know teacher assessments have not been used historically because they tend to be significantly wide of the mark in a significant proportion of cases—there is not going to be a



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minimum requirement against which to assess the merits of the appeal. Do you feel a minimum requirement in terms of content would be helpful?

Nick Gibb: We consulted on this very issue in the consultation and I am very confident in the approach we have taken, and there needs to be sufficient coverage of the curriculum to allow progression.

I visited a secondary school in Portsmouth on Friday. I am not saying this is universal, but the teachers there were very confident—in a range of subjects, by the way—that they had covered the whole curriculum. That, of course, will not be the experience in every school because they will have suffered different rates of infection in the community and students will have suffered as a consequence.

David Simmonds: Thanks very much, Minister. It sounds like it is time to get the exams back on.

Simon Lebus: You were talking about the level of content in the context of appeals, but appeals are not designed to make judgments about the level of content cover. They are designed to deal with cases of severe contention about academic misjudgment. The appeals process is designed on a slightly different basis. The issue of content coverage is not something I would expect to be central to the approach to appeals this year.

Ian Bauckham: A further level of complexity this year is the breadth/depth issue. Some teachers will have used the time available to cover everything, but potentially a little more superficially than normal. Others will have used the time available to focus their efforts on a smaller number of topics or parts of the content area. Designing a system that takes into account that level of complexity can only really be done with the flexible approach that we have adopted this year.

Q1295 **Jonathan Gullis:** We have talked a lot about grade inflation. I also want to talk about grade suppression. In Stoke-on-Trent, we rank, sadly, poorly in terms of educational outcomes when they are benchmarked against national averages. My concern is for students in areas like Stoke North, Kidsgrove and Talke who do not benefit from having sharp-elbowed parents to fight their corner, and due to the fact that those areas historically suffered from poor educational outcomes.

Are they going to be the victims of grade suppression as schools seek to avoid investigation over their reported grades? In higher-performing areas, schools may submit inflated grades. What criteria will be used to determine which centres are checked, to avoid disadvantaged students being further disadvantaged in this manner?

Simon Lebus: We are back to the various discussions we have already had about the quality assurance arrangements. I am not going to go into detail about it again, but there will be three layers of checks. Part of the process probably relevant to what you are talking about is that centres will look at the records of achievement or attainment that they have over



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the last couple of years. If the results this year look massively under or over what has happened in the last two years, they would be expected to explain that. There could be perfectly natural explanations for them being much better. It could be a new teacher or it could be a different course. There are all sorts of things that could lead to it, but there will be a requirement for contextualisation.

To the more general point on regional differential attainment, the exam system records that. It is not a remedy for it. That will be the same this year as it would be in any year.

Q1296 Jonathan Gullis: My concern with this regional idea is that it is forgotten that Stoke-on-Trent is part of the West Midlands. I am from Stratford-upon-Avon, so I am from the south of the West Midlands, which is a far more affluent area. Stoke-on-Trent, unfortunately, is not in that same situation. Looking at regional models means that somewhere like Stoke is going to get unfairly punished by better-off areas in the West Midlands, particularly places like Warwickshire, for example.

I know you are saying that there is quality assurance and they could have a new teacher. If a school says, "They have a new teacher and that is why they have done vastly better," who is making the decision on whether that is a reasonable argument? How is it being monitored so that it is being equally applied across England?

Simon Lebus: The exam boards are responsible for the quality assurance arrangements. They will get returns about each school from the heads of centres describing the processes they have used, giving records of what information has been used, providing an audit trail, as it were, and they will be able to make judgments based on that. There is no particular reason to believe that teachers are any less well able to exercise their professional judgment in Stoke-on-Trent than elsewhere in the Midlands, and hence I would not expect there to be any systemic difference based on the use of teacher judgment.

Q1297 Jonathan Gullis: Simon, I take issue with your response, because I am not doubting the teachers in Stoke-on-Trent. I was a secondary school teacher for eight years before I entered Parliament. I was a head of year and I taught GCSE and A-levels, so I understand what teachers are going through.

I am also aware that teachers are going to feel incredibly pressured. They do not want their school to be investigated and have everything looked at because suddenly they are awarding kids much higher marks, which means that there will be kids, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, who were on track maybe to achieve a grade 9, 8 or 7 at GCSE or an A* or A at A-level but who are now probably going to get downgraded out of fear that it does not somehow fit in with the school's overall progress, the region's overall progress or the city's overall progress.



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My issue is that this is going to directly impact on grade suppression, not because of teachers' ill intentions but because of the fact that they are having to work to a system that is avoiding everyone being punished for a few kids who would have done much better had they been able to sit exams. How is that being taken into account?

Simon Lebus: My son is a secondary teacher in a rough area of London. I am quite sympathetic to what you are talking about. You are suggesting that there will be an inquisitorial approach based on quality assurance records. That is not the idea. The idea is that if the quality assurance processes flag up something that looks peculiar, it will be investigated. It may well be that the investigation finds there are good reasons for it being very different from what one might have expected, but there are all sorts of different issues that the quality assurance might flag. The idea that there will be any systemic pressure on teachers to underestimate student performance because they are worried about the school being subject to aggressive scrutiny is not the intention. It is not going to work like that. The intention is to uncover egregious abuse, malpractice or simply systemic misapplication of judgment. There is no particular reason to think that that ought to happen in a normal situation.

Q1298 **Jonathan Gullis:** It is good to know there is not going to be an inquisition, but you have said that a centre or a school could say that it has a new teacher, which is why kids have performed better. If schools are allowed to give such examples or evidence as to why they have done better, what is the benchmark for an acceptable piece of evidence to say why a child would have done better? Exam boards are making those decisions, but how do I know that different exam boards will accept or not accept different arguments?

Ian Bauckham: This year's process has an evidence-based approach. If a teacher is able to point to evidence of student work that would support the grade they have been given, then that is the grade they will get. There is no intention to ration grades or predetermine grades by the kind of school or the area the school is located in. We are asking teachers to have regard to the prior record of their school, but only to have regard to it. If students produce evidence that supports the grades they are being awarded and if that school is selected for checking, the grade will be upheld because this is an evidence-based approach. I hope that gets close to answering the question.

Q1299 **Jonathan Gullis:** Thank you, Ian. I have gone from suppression back to inflation. The worry would then be for the upcoming year 10s going into year 11 in the next academic year, and for the year 12s going into year 13. How are we going to ensure that they are not penalised by potential grade inflation when they sit exams? They will be the first cohort for two years. How do we make sure they are not victims of this pandemic as well as those who have lost learning?

Simon Lebus: Sorry, are you talking about future cohorts?



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Jonathan Gullis: Yes. I am wondering how we make sure that the inflation that potentially will be built into the system is then avoided. I know the Chair has asked these questions, but I am still not quite clear in my mind. Next year's cohort will sit exams—or we certainly hope they will—and I certainly believe we need to make sure everything like that happens again normally. How do we ensure they are not penalised by grade inflation?

Simon Lebus: We are already thinking about arrangements for 2022, and there will probably be adaptations, something along the lines of what had originally been planned for this year.

On the particular point about the 2022 cohort, those taking A-levels will be unusual in that they will not have sat public exams before. That will have to be thought about and accommodated in terms of the arrangements. In the long term, there needs to be a managed return to a more normal distribution and a more normal set of outcomes. The way that is going to happen needs to be debated, discussed and consulted upon.

I have been involved in the administration and management of public exams since about 2002. The issue that is always problematic whenever there are many changes in the system is getting acceptance and getting understanding of the standards. Clearly, there has been a massive disruption. A return to normality has to be managed in a thoughtful way and after consultation with all the various stakeholders involved.

Q1300 **Jonathan Gullis:** Minister, we are aware that many more students achieved their target A-level grades last year than ever before. There was then a huge pressure on university spaces.

I appreciate, Minister, this is not your brief and there is another Minister who oversees higher education, but has the Department prepared to properly support universities this year and, indeed, in future years until the number of students going to university normalises?

Nick Gibb: Yes, we have. For example, we moved the UCAS deadline and pushed it back to 29 January. In fact, 415,000 people in England applied for undergraduate courses by that deadline, and that is 11% up on the equivalent January deadline in 2020. Michelle Donelan, the Universities Minister, is of course talking to the sector about the set of proposals we have decided upon so it can reflect on that in terms of the offers it makes to students. We have seen only an 11% increase. The sector is very aware and is very prepared for the forthcoming academic year.

Q1301 **Jonathan Gullis:** Why was the decision taken to make exam board-provided test papers optional? Was it possible to have at least made some papers compulsory—for example, GCSE English language and mathematics—because of their fundamental importance for progression?



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Nick Gibb: We considered all these issues as we were finalising the issues that we consulted on. In fact, on the issue of whether the exam materials should be optional or mandatory, we asked that question in the consultation. The overwhelming response was that they should be an optional tool for teachers. Even those schools that use them cannot totally rely on those questions from the exam boards. They also have to have a range of evidence to demonstrate the grade they are going to submit for that student.

Q1302 **Jonathan Gullis:** Without test papers being compulsory and without external moderation, how will it be possible to anchor standards and have any real degree of consistency between schools and colleges in their grading?

Nick Gibb: That is the issue that has dominated the conversation this morning, and it is why all those quality assurance processes are in place and why the exam boards will be providing quite detailed guidance on a subject-by-subject basis, including grade descriptors and so on. Those teachers who use the question bank materials can choose which questions they want to set their students. There will be marking schemes attached to those questions and exemplar answers as well. There is a huge amount of support for teachers—

Q1303 **Chair:** Going back to my question, you could have had mandatory mini papers in at least maths and English and made adjustments so that schools that had missed teaching were able to do them. Why would you not do that? I still do not understand why you would not at least have some kind of consistent standard of assessment in one or two subjects.

Nick Gibb: We consulted on this, as I said—

Chair: You can always hide behind consultations. Consultations say a lot of things, and Governments either agree with them or disagree with them. I am asking you particularly because of your passion for standards in education.

Nick Gibb: Those passions remain but, in this pandemic, another overriding objective is fairness. We did not want to cancel exams and then bring in mini exams to replace exams, with all the unfairness that is inherent in exams this year. We asked an open question in the consultation about whether the use of those question banks—from which teachers could select questions—should be mandatory. The overwhelming response was that it should not be and that it should be an option for teachers.

Q1304 **Jonathan Gullis:** Minister, I think you are going to need to look not just at exams but at whether a standardised test from reception up to year 10 needs to be done in this country so we understand how much lost learning has taken place and how much kids have gone back. That means literacy and numeracy in primary, English, maths and science at secondary, because ultimately that will give teachers the data to analyse where they need to help. I really hope that, as part of the catch-up, you



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will feed that into Sir Kevan Collins to make sure those things take place.

Chair: Yes, I agree with Jonathan. As you know, I have raised this question to you a few times and you say there are surveys being done, but surely there should be an assessment of every pupil, particularly those in exam years, for lost learning to see how much catch-up is needed. That would have been a good approach to working out what kind of exam system you would have.

Nick Gibb: There is no question that teachers will be conducting diagnostic assessments of their students when they return. There is no question that that will be happening up and down the country as students return to school, but that is for the professionalism of teachers. Kevan Collins will also be considering this.

Also, as we have discussed before, we have contracted with Renaissance Learning and EPI to analyse the vast amount of data that Renaissance Learning has about reading and maths attainment in children from years 3 to 9. That is a vast resource that, first, gives us a baseline and, secondly, we can then use periodically to find out what progress has been made and what learning has been lost.

Q1305 **David Simmonds:** I want to pick up something Simon said about the purpose of the checks to deal with the more egregious examples. The concern that Committee members have is not that we have seen a culture where there are egregious examples of people being given poor teacher assessments but that we have seen a situation where around 60% to 90% of the grades awarded through teacher assessment are wrong. Particularly for disadvantaged students, they tend to go against them. For students who were already in a good position, they tend to go in their favour. It seems to me there needs to be a greater focus on both moderation and the appeals process to restore that confidence in the fairness of the outcomes.

I appreciate that we are not dealing with a perfect situation, this is an incredibly difficult one, but it would be helpful for more attention to be paid to that because the absence of minimum requirements across many of these areas seems to feed into the sense that we are very reliant upon a judgment that we know historically has not been reliable.

Chair: Is it right that just 16% of students who go to university get their predicted grades?

It was very nice to see a cat on screen, by the way, David.

Simon Lebus: It is certainly true that there is quite a lot of evidence that UCAS-predicted grades are wrong. As to the more general principle, it was being suggested that 60% to 90% of teacher judgments are wrong. I am not sure what that is based on, but my observation would be that teachers are very good at determining and assessing the rank order of the students within a class.



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The difficulty is in then trying to rationalise that and internalise the standard against a national standard. When we compared the correlation between teacher judgments and the moderated grades last year, there was a very good correlation in terms of the distribution. The teacher judgment was slightly above. I am not unduly concerned.

Teachers and schools have multiple attainment data that is gathered about their students over a long period of time, which is a useful source of contextualisation, going back to some of the discussions we were having earlier about the information you would be able to use to determine whether teacher judgments are broadly correct or not.

Also, we are talking about collecting data over a period of time, and that tends to be more valid. There is always a tension in assessments between reliability and validity. This is actually a very valid way of getting a good all-round picture. These are holistic judgments we are making. They are not based on exam scores. It is a suitable method of arriving at good quality judgments within the context of quite a well-developed framework and quality assurance scaffolding.

Q1306 Dr Caroline Johnson: The Chair suggested that the reliability of A-level predicted grades provided to UCAS for university is very poor and, in fact, 75% of young people taking A-levels in any given year do not achieve grades as high as those predicted for UCAS. They are predictions by the teachers of what people will achieve in their exams. Why will the predictions they give for these grades be much more reliable than the predictions they give to universities every year for A-level grades?

Simon Lebus: They are not predictions of grades. They are actual grades. Predictions for universities are given at the beginning of the second year, so there is quite a lot of learning time still to happen.

They are also made in a slightly different spirit. Very often, they are aspirational grades. Somebody is told, "You can aspire to get a place at this university if you work hard. You are capable of getting this, but there is still quite a lot of work to do." There is a point in a student's learning at which those predictions are made. They may be made to encourage a student to work harder, but they are not designed as a high-stakes exercise in the way that the award of a grade is. It is a completely different exercise, and I would expect it to be approached in a different spirit.

Q1307 Kim Johnson: Good morning, panel. My question is on pressure on teachers.

Ian, do you think making teachers responsible for judging grades will put them in an intolerable position with pressure from both students and parents? How will unconscious bias and discrimination be managed? We know that black and working-class boys are more likely to receive poor teacher assessments.



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Ian Bauckham: That is a very pertinent question. There is absolutely no doubt that this year we are asking teachers to step up and do more than they usually have to do by playing a significant part in the determination of grades. It is an additional task for teachers to do.

My view is that the vast majority of teachers want to do this, recognising the situation we are in, and want to do it well. We need to make sure that examination boards give them the structures and the incentives to do the job that they can see needs doing well.

Being clear that everybody will be subject to the same quality assurance and the same checks gives teachers confidence to do the right thing in each individual circumstance. If that quality assurance, structure and scaffolding is not there, there will be greater pressure on teachers to bow to the various pressures they will undoubtedly come under. By being clear that they will be checked, teachers will be able to respond and say, "I know you would all like me to give you grade 9, but I am afraid I cannot do that because I will be subject to checking. My head teacher will have to sign this off as an accurate reflection of your achievement. I know you all want me to do this, but I cannot." We can support teachers in doing the right thing, which is fundamentally what they want to do.

Kim Johnson: Simon, do you have anything further to add?

Simon Lebus: Not a huge amount, except to say that there will be quite detailed guidance provided to centres about issues like unconscious bias and discrimination. I also understand that colleagues did some research looking into the teacher-awarded grades from last year. There was no evidence that they were able to find of any systemic bias in the results. I hope that would provide some reassurance.

Q1308 **Kim Johnson:** Minister—or all of you, actually—you have mentioned that this additional work will put pressure on workloads for teachers. What resources will be available to teachers to manage this significant increase?

Nick Gibb: We are conscious of workload. As Simon and Ian have said, there was support for this approach from teachers in the consultation. We have worked very closely with the sector. I have regular meetings with the unions and I have regular meetings with a representative sample of head teachers and principals. We have discussed every small decision we have had to take with the profession as we have gone along.

I am always conscious of the workload of teachers. There is no question that during the pandemic they have been triply burdened with teaching in class, teaching remotely at the same time and also keeping the school Covid secure, which means making sure that behaviour of students in the school is compliant with all the requirements that we put on schools to keep those schools safe. There is no question that teachers have joined the ranks of the heroes of this pandemic. We all owe them, the whole profession and support staff, a great deal of thanks for what they have achieved in this period.



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More generally, since 2014 we have sought to properly manage down the workload. We conducted a huge survey of teachers on what they thought was the cause. It was things like data collection, requirements for multiple marking mechanisms, lesson preparation and the bureaucracy that they felt was attached to that. We have set up working groups to tackle each of those. The recommendations of those working groups have been implemented in many schools up and down the country and, through the workload diaries that have been produced, we have seen a reduction in the excess hours that teachers have had to work to cope with those things.

We take it seriously and we continue to address workload pressures on teachers. However, during the pandemic there is no question that teachers have had to shoulder a huge burden as we all seek to tackle this challenge.

Q1309 Kim Johnson: Ian, you mentioned that teachers want this to happen, but I believe it will put emotional pressure on teachers. What do you think is needed, as a teacher, to support teachers through this process?

Ian Bauckham: It is critically important not to neglect the role of school leadership in all this. It is important for heads of schools and colleges, principals of schools and colleges, to make sure they have a clear structure in place that supports teachers in the work they are doing and to put in streamlined approaches to allow for internal moderation within schools.

One of the things that we are clear about, from an Ofqual and exam board perspective, is that we do not want to put in cumbersome and workload-heavy processes that require teachers to go out of school to other schools to do cross-school moderation, because we recognise how much time that takes and what sort of workload pressure that can bring with it.

Again, this is all about asking school leaders to step up to make sure that teachers get the support and structure they need to do this in as streamlined and as workload-efficient a way as possible.

Kim Johnson: Simon, do you have anything further to add?

Simon Lebus: No, I do not think I will add anything except, again, to reiterate the comment I made earlier that I hope everybody will give teachers space to do this job. It is a really important job, and it has a critical effect in terms of youngsters getting the right grades to enable them to make the right choices about where they go in life. Everybody—including parents, as I mentioned before—needs to give teachers the space to do that and to get on with it.

Q1310 Kim Johnson: Simon, students who are retaking exams or who are home-educated private candidates will not have the same bank of evidence to support decisions about grades. How will schools and colleges be able to corroborate their coursework and reliably predict a grade in



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each case?

Simon Lebus: They will have the opportunity to attach themselves to a centre. They will be able to use evidence that they have accumulated in the course of their learning, and they can discuss and review that with the centre. There will also be opportunities for them to take the externally set tasks that schools will be using anyway. It will be a combination of those things. They should also have access to some of the other work that schools and colleges will be using as centres to assess their students. It is going to require them to work with centres to come up with something that will allow them to demonstrate what they have learned and what they are capable of so that they can be awarded a grade.

Q1311 **Kim Johnson:** Do you think it makes sense for them to take exam board-set papers on topics that they are familiar with?

Simon Lebus: Indeed, it is inherent in the approach that they should be assessed on material they are familiar with. They should not be assessed on things they are not familiar with, otherwise you cannot fairly form a view of what they are capable of doing.

Ian Bauckham: What Simon has said is absolutely right. I will add that there was strong support in the consultation, in particular from those who are home educated or may be private candidates, for private candidates to follow broadly the same approach as others and access grading via a centre. The challenge, of course, is making sure that every candidate can find a centre through which to work, and work is in hand to make sure that is achieved as far as it possibly can be at the moment.

Nick Gibb: Ian said what I was going to say, which is that they will be assessed on the same basis as other candidates using a range of evidence. Some of that evidence may well be the exam board-provided materials, those question bank questions. For those candidates who do not have a relationship with a school, we are working hard to find centres where they can have that assessment performed and that evidence compiled. The JCQ and the Department will be saying more about that soon.

Q1312 **Jonathan Gullis:** I think it was you, Minister, or maybe Ofqual, who talked about—

Ian Mearns: Jonathan, your microphone is off.

Jonathan Gullis: Sorry, I thought my dulcet tones would have been loud enough to reach out there so that is a good thing, perhaps I am getting quieter. Ian's zen is calming me.

Chair: We are thinking of the viewers, Jonathan. They want to hear you, too.

Jonathan Gullis: It was referred to earlier that it was actually students in the consultation who thought test papers should be optional. No others



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in the consultation thought that; they were happy for it to be mandatory. Why was the decision taken to ignore teachers and, therefore, go with students on this occasion?

Simon Lebus: There are some practical issues. One of the concerns was that if you made them mandatory and required them to be sat under the conditions that normal exams are sat under, so all at the same time across the estate, those arrangements could find themselves victims of further Covid outbreaks. Again, you must remember this was all before the vaccine had come into effect, so there was a practical concern.

There is also an assessment issue. The nature of exams is that they sample across a range of learning and they are designed in that way, so that is why you have multiple papers in a particular subject so that there is an opportunity to sample in a thorough and consistent way across the domain of what has been learned. That would not be possible this year. Having a mini exam, you could end up examining people in a non-representative sample of what they have learned.

We come back to the discussion earlier about breadth and depth. Having the same measurement instrument to cater for students who cover the entire breadth of the syllabus but not in much detail, as against those who covered a portion of it in great depth, is not a very good way of measuring attainment in any consistent fashion.

Although the concept sounds attractive, that mini exams would provide a consistent standard benchmark that you could use, I think the assessment reality is that in these circumstances it would not work like that.

Q1313 **Jonathan Gullis:** Simon, I cannot help but find that quite amusing. Obviously, in January there were exam rounds planned. You have also told us time and again that we need to trust the teachers and give them space to do it. The teachers said they wanted to do this, so I do not understand why we have ignored the teachers.

Simon Lebus: Are you saying that the teachers in the consultation said they wanted a lot of mini exams? I do not recall that.

Jonathan Gullis: The only people who said they wanted them to be optional were students; teachers were happy for them to be mandatory.

Nick Gibb: Jonathan, there were mixed views among teachers in response to the consultation. I do not think it is fair to say that the teachers were massively in favour of there being no—

Q1314 **Chair:** You implied that, basically, the whole world was against it when you answered the question. What Jonathan and I are saying is that there should be some kind of standardisation, some kind of mini papers, even if it is just in the core subjects, to go back to Sir Jon Coles's key complaint. In reality what Jonathan has pointed out is that it is predominately the students who are in favour of your system.



Nick Gibb: Teachers were not unanimously in favour of it either; there were mixed views about it. There is a workload issue as well. We wanted to have the maximum flexibility for teachers in compiling the range of evidence that they were going to submit. Then, of course, there is the other argument that with the consistency that you seek, even if you confine it to those core subjects, you would bring an element of unfairness, given the very different experiences students have had during the year.

All these decisions are not easy to make. I think the decision we came to is the right one, given the response to the consultation and the—

Q1315 **Chair:** That is why I described it as “all must have prizes.” Rather than helping the individual student in a particular way, you are basically saying that everybody should do the same system, whatever the background or however much learning there is. You are saying there should be a uniform system, which means no standardised assessment. As I say, it is an “all must have prizes” approach.

Nick Gibb: No, it is not, because not everybody will get the top grades. As Simon and Ian have painstakingly explained, there are these processes in place to ensure that the incentives are there for the teacher to use their judgment, their professional judgment, unimpeded by external pressure to come up with a grade that is right for their students.

I think we have produced the best possible system to incentivise that outcome. I am confident, given the huge consultation that took place—not just the formal consultation but the work we did with the sector leading up to the consultation and subsequently in reaching the final decision—that we have come to the fairest and most rigorous approach that we can, short of actually holding exams. Introducing some mini-exam system into it—albeit that would satisfy some viewpoints, such as Sir Jon Coles—would also create opposition from other quarters that you are bringing back the unfairness that we sought to get rid of when we cancelled exams this year.

Q1316 **Jonathan Gullis:** The issue with unfairness is something that has always existed in this debate about exams. I am one of those who, just to make it perfectly clear, like David Johnston, thinks exams are the best form of assessment and I fully support them. However, the unfairness argument has existed time and again. Obviously, I have been through the system where we had coursework and exams and slowly saw the reduction of coursework to it being eliminated.

If we are saying that an exam now will be unfair, how are we going to counter that argument next year when we are bringing exams back? There is ultimately going to be some unfairness for those who have missed out on education throughout the pandemic and who are the first cohort to sit exams that will be impacted by grade inflation. The problem is that, while I get what you are saying about the here and now, I am also thinking about the future cohorts, for which this argument will come



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up again. If we do not have the answers, we will go around this circle once again.

Nick Gibb: Yes, but the unfairness is the unfairness brought about by the pandemic. The fairest system that people have devised to assess students is an exam. However, that is not fair in the current pandemic circumstances, the unique circumstances of this pandemic where you have seen students having to self-isolate, you have seen schools closed to most pupils, you have seen remote education put in place, and so on. As I said before, up until January we were confident that we could proceed with exams, albeit with the mitigations in place of preannouncing the topic areas that will be covered to help deal with that unfairness. However, once we moved into this new layer of lockdown, those measures became insufficient.

Q1317 **Chair:** Can I quote to you what Sir Jon Coles said? He is such an important figure. He says, "this approach would be supported by national tests, provided that such tests have the same validity and reliability as a normal exam. Such tests would only be one piece of evidence which would be used by teachers in determining grades and there could be a choice of national tests within a subject, covering different topics. They would, however, give students an opportunity to show what they know and can do against national standards. A student reaching a certain grade on a national test would not be given a lower grade by teachers but could be awarded a higher grade based on other evidence. In this way, a national test would allow students to establish for themselves a 'floor' below which their results would not fall." Surely that solves the problem you have set out?

Jonathan Gullis: Chair, to back you up on this, there were exams planned for the summer, several rounds, to ensure that if someone missed a paper they would still get a grade. Therefore, there were exams already put in place for the summer to help with this system. I know the pandemic has been unfair, and I get that, but the problem is that next year's cohort will say that they have also been victims of the pandemic because they have effectively missed two academic years' worth of education, what for most schools would be their entire GCSE education from year 9 through to year 11. How are we going to say the pandemic is no longer unfair on them? We have already heard the national tutoring programme has reached only 125,000 people out of the 1.5 million who are eligible. Ultimately, we are not going to get around 1.5 million people by the end of the next academic year before they sit the exam, are we?

Nick Gibb: There is a range of questions asked there. The first point is about Jon Coles's view. They are his views.

Chair: It is not just him, there is a substantial amount of people who feel the same, if I base it on the emails and the interactions I have had with people who have been writing to me on this.



Nick Gibb: In the consultation, 46% of teachers thought that the A-level paper should be optional and 51% thought that the GCSE paper should be optional. It is almost evenly split among the teaching profession.

Q1318 **Chair:** Explain why what I quoted to you is wrong. Why do you think he is wrong?

Nick Gibb: If you have a consistent test across the country, you are essentially bringing in a mini exam through the back door.

Q1319 **Chair:** He is saying that a student reaching a certain grade on a national test would not be given a lower grade by teachers but could be awarded a higher grade based on other evidence. He is saying a mix and match.

Nick Gibb: That is what we have, but it is optional and I suspect a lot of teachers will use it. The advantage of this system is that the teachers can look at the material, they can choose the questions that reflect the curriculum that they have been teaching, and they can use that as part of the range of evidence that they are submitting. Therefore, we are doing that, but the unions—

Q1320 **Chair:** I do not think you are doing that at all. If you are saying it is optional, it is optional. That is why people are asking—

Nick Gibb: I have given you the figures of what teachers' views are. The unions and school leaders were also worried that mandating it would be viewed as exams by the back door.

Q1321 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I think it was Simon who suggested earlier that we would need to make adjustments in 2022. Some children during the pandemic have received lower levels of disruption than others, and some have seen more loss to their learning depending on the quality of online provision that was available right at the start. When do we think that comes to an end and it is reasonable to expect children to have caught up? Would you expect my daughter in year 9 to be able to sit proper exams in two years' time? What about my little boy in year 1, who also missed some of his learning this term, will he have been able to catch that up in the next 12 years?

I do not understand where the finish point comes at which we say, "We make adjustments for this long and then we stop" and how things are fair on the children who come into that cohort where we then stop making adjustments. At some point we cannot continue to try to peg children to their schools' prior attainment forevermore.

Simon Lebus: There is a variety of different issues there. The identification of what learning loss has happened to which groups at what level is very much work under way at the moment. There is a lot of research going on about differential learning loss and how it has affected different age groups and how it has affected different demographics. However, it is quite clear that the process of recovering lost learning is going to take several years and there will have to be policy initiatives to deal with that over a period of time.



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So far as 2022 is concerned, the thinking at the moment is about adaptations along the line that had originally been contemplated for this year, when exams were still to go ahead. That is based on the reality that the cohort taking exams next year will have suffered considerable disruption to their learning—although we would hope not on the scale and at the level that has been suffered by this year’s cohort—so that it would be a reasonable thing to carry out some form of public exams, but that they would be adapted to reflect the learning disruption that has taken place.

So far as what happens after then and some of the more general questions that are being asked about the value of the currency and consistency of grading over time and how people interpret what grades are going to look like, I think there will have to be reflection on what we do longer term to the exam system to take account of the disruption that has occurred over the last three years and the disjunct, because there is a big disjunct, if you like, before and after. Therefore, you inevitably end up asking the question, “Do we in post-Covid times approach things slightly differently?” and, of course, all sorts of issues have been raised about coursework and teacher judgment. There has always been a dialogue about the weight you give teacher judgment as opposed to summer-term exams. All those are issues that have been surfaced by this, and they will form part of the policy mix that is determined in order to address lost learning over the coming years.

Q1322 Dr Caroline Johnson: You briefly mentioned the assessment of lost learning, which is being made through research. One of the pieces of evidence given to the Committee, I think it was last week, said that has been done using an Ipsos MORI survey of teachers’ thoughts on the issue.

Do you think suggestions from members of this Committee that national testing, similar to the SATs, to assess where children are at now and next year perhaps would inform not just where the learning has been lost in different areas of the country, in different schools and in different parts of the curriculum, but also how quickly that catch-up is taken? Particularly with year 6 SATs we have a national standard, we can tell what happened in 2019.

Simon Lebus: SATs do not come within Ofqual’s competence, I think, and I am not familiar enough with them to comment. Ofqual carries out national reference tests, and any tests that are taken consistently over a period of time are useful in making judgments about whole-cohort attainment and progression.

Ian Bauckham: The national reference test that will be taken in English and maths in May this year will give us, from a scientifically selected sample from around the country, good representative results and a clear steer on where current GCSE students are in English and maths. It is not as comprehensive a survey as perhaps the one the Committee was envisaging, but it is none the less a scientifically designed snapshot of



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achievement at the end of this pandemic period. That will be a very useful starting point once we get those results.

Q1323 David Simmonds: On the subject of appeals, I would like to get a sense of what will happen if there is a disagreement between the exam boards and examining centres on the grading decisions that have been taken. Given, clearly, the defence against large numbers of appeals is significant levels of grade inflation in the system, what measures are likely to be in place to try to anticipate and prevent the consequences of that? Specifically, how can we be confident that appeals will work reliably for students who have been home educated?

Nick Gibb: The appeal process has two steps. First of all, the student will appeal to the school to make sure that the processes have been accurate, they have added the grades up correctly and so on, and that the internal QA requirements have been adhered to. If there is an adjustment at that point, they discover an error, then they report that to the board and that grade will be adjusted.

If there are no errors but the student is still unhappy, then the school, on behalf of the student, will appeal to the board. Then they will look at the range of material that provides the evidence for that grade. They will look at it to see whether there has been a reasonable exercise of academic judgment, which is the phrase that will guide them. If there is a piece of work or an essay on Bismarck or something they might have given a higher grade to because they thought it was better than the teacher thought it was, that will not be sufficient. We are not going to have a different judgment on the content.

What they are looking to see is whether, in coming up with that grade, there has been a reasonable exercise of academic judgment. If there has been, there will be no adjustment to the grade. If there has not been, the board will be able to mandate a different grade. The students need to be aware that, of course, grades can go up and they can go down if there is an appeal.

The numbers of appeals every year are fairly significant. The requirements for remarking of papers run into the tens of thousands. Ofqual might be able to give a more accurate figure for that. The measures that take place at the beginning of the process, where the teacher will be encouraged to say to their students what evidence they will be using to form the judgment that backs the grade they will submit, will also help to deal with appeals at that stage because they will know the material and any problems they might have with some of the content of that evidence can be raised at that point.

Simon Lebus: In a normal year there are about 300,000 appeals, and that leads to about 70,000 grade changes. I would anticipate probably fewer this year. One of the things that drives the volume of appeals in normal years is that people can analyse where they are near a grade boundary because it is all based on marks that are generated by the



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exam papers. This year they will not be able to do that because they will be holistic judgments, the grades will not be based on marks in the same way, so they will not be able to be unpicked.

As the Minister mentioned, there will be a socialisation of the work that is being used on which the grades are based before 18 June. Students will have a right to know what work of theirs is being used to make the grade judgment, so that when it comes to results day in August it will be no great surprise.

The other major thing is that grades will be able to go down as well as up. The system is designed to deal with gross miscarriages of academic judgment; it is not designed to deal with marginal differences of opinion.

Q1324 Ian Mearns: We should remember that the former chair of Ofqual told us that up to 25% of grades could be inaccurate by one grade plus or minus. That is in a good year, so it does call into question the number of people who are making appeals.

Based on last year's performance, at our hearing on 2 September the then chair of Ofqual committed to release all of last summer's source data for deep forensic analysis. A post to the Ofqual website on 7 December then stated, "We expect that researchers will be able to apply to access this data from early 2021", which was confirmed in an Ofqual report published on 18 December. As of yesterday, an enquiry to the Office for National Statistics revealed that this release had not yet happened. When is it going to happen, and how soon can we do that deep forensic analysis of what happened last year?

Chair: Concise answers, please.

Nick Gibb: I think it is a matter for Ofqual in terms of that data. We have, as you know, Robert, submitted a summary of all the various meetings that were held over the period and what was discussed. The deep forensic data is a matter for Ofqual.

Simon Lebus: I can undertake to find out what the situation is. I cannot answer immediately, I am afraid.

Q1325 Ian Mearns: I thought I would mention it because the then chair, back on 2 September, said this data would be available. I would hope that Ofqual would, therefore, get about doing that so people can look at the data that was promised to us five or six months ago.

Simon Lebus: I am afraid I only came into the role on 4 January.

Q1326 Ian Mearns: Given the diversity of voluntary and technical qualifications and their practical nature, what other major problems do you foresee in regulating these qualifications where exams and face-to-face testing cannot take place?

Simon Lebus: There is a big variety of vocational and technical qualifications, and we have essentially chunked them into three families.



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There are those like A-Levels and GCSE, such as BTECs and OCR Nationals, where the approach adopted will be very much in line with the general qualification approach. There is a slight difference in those cases that quite a lot of the assessment evidence has already been banked, but the principle is that those students will be held to the same sort of standard as general qualification students are held to. So far as qualifications that test professional competence are concerned, things like electricians and so on, those assessments will go on in the normal way, for the good reason that you do not want people graduating into those professions who have not demonstrated their competence to carry them out.

There are other qualifications, such as functional skills qualifications, which will go on broadly as they are at present, and will continue to be assessed. In the event that candidates cannot access assessment, there is provision for them to be able to access teacher-assessed grades in the same way, but we are not expecting great use to be made of that because most of those are available online and on demand.

Q1327 Ian Mearns: How soon will we have sight of the methodology by which all of this will be conducted?

Simon Lebus: The technical consultations are out at the moment, and it is expected that the awarding bodies will be able to release some detail by the end of this month.

Q1328 Chair: Nick, if, come 18 June, the grades submitted across the board show rampant grade inflation, what will you do?

Nick Gibb: You are asking a very hypothetical question. I think we have put in place the best possible system and scaffolding. We have very detailed guidance about how to ensure that every student is awarded a grade that fairly reflects the teacher's assessment of their ability and performance. I think we can be reassured that we have a good system in place, and then there are the various post-18 June quality assurance processes in place as well, and on top of that are the appeals. I am not anticipating this system going wrong in the way that you describe.

Q1329 David Johnston: If that is the case, how will you measure the success of it? If you do not think we are going to have the rampant grade inflation, what will be the measure that the system has worked?

Nick Gibb: That is probably a question for Ofqual. From my perspective, inevitably, as I described at the very beginning of the session, there will be generosity in 2021, because no student will have a bad day in the exam hall. As in the example I gave of the geography class, the teacher will assume, for example, that six are very capable of getting the top grades, but in reality, what happens in a normal year, of those six generally only four would.

This year the teacher cannot say which are the four and which are the two. Since the evidence that teacher will have demonstrates that they are



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all capable of getting those top grades, that is what will be submitted. When you add that all together, there will be more generosity than there would be in a normal year when there are exams. The standard that the teacher will be assessing those students against will be the standard that they are used to in previous years. That is the overarching approach to how this assessment will be conducted.

Simon Lebus: I think success would look like a set of outcomes that commanded public acceptance, felt fair to the candidates and enabled progression.

Q1330 **Chair:** Minister, you are saying that you do not think it is going to happen, but you are not saying that, if it does happen, there is any plan to deal with it.

Nick Gibb: What I am saying is that we have put in place measures that are designed to tackle excesses. In the quality assurance process of the exam board, this sampling basis, where a school has submitted grades that are out of kilter with the grades they have achieved in the past, that will trigger a conversation. It does not mean to say that the grades will be adjusted, necessarily. They might be adjusted, in which case you are wrong to say there will not be any adjustments made, because it could well result in adjustments being made. But if they can demonstrate why—like the example Jonathan Gullis gave of a really good new teacher coming in, or they might have a different cohort of students in that school—on the basis of the evidence that the student has produced that that grade stands, then it will stand. If they cannot, of course, there will be adjustments made to the grades.

Q1331 **Ian Mearns:** Simon, going back to my previous point, would you let us know when you intend to publish that data, please?

Simon Lebus: Sorry, the data about last summer?

Ian Mearns: About last year.

Simon Lebus: Yes, of course.

Ian Mearns: Obviously, there are a number of people out there wanting to have a good look at this.

Simon Lebus: Sorry, can I just confirm exactly the data you want?

Ian Mearns: The source data. The then chair, on 2 September, committed to release all last summer's source data for deep forensic analysis, and a post on the Ofqual website said on 7 December it is expected that, "researchers will be able to apply to access this data from early 2021".

Ian Bauckham: We remain committed to doing that, and I will write to you, Chair and the Committee, after this hearing to confirm precise timescales for doing so.

Q1332 **Chair:** Thank you, both of you. I want to ask Nick a completely different



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question. I think it would be helpful to the public watching if you could give us an update on the very, very happy day yesterday of schools and colleges opening again. Obviously, it is early days, very early, but could you set out what the situation is?

Nick Gibb: Yes, it was a very successful day, a happy day. I think children are excited to be back in school. I visited a primary school in Streatham yesterday, and I could see the children were very happy to be back. Within an hour they were busy focusing on their lessons, so it was very good to see.

I would say that 99% of schools, roughly, are fully open to all their students. We must remember that schools have been open the whole time during this pandemic for vulnerable children and children of critical workers, but it was good to see children back in school. On Friday, as I mentioned, I visited a school in Portsmouth where they had already started the testing of students, and that seemed to go very smoothly.

Q1333 **Chair:** You mention testing. There was a little confusion yesterday in terms of lateral flow tests and PCR tests, whether children need to isolate if they get tested at home, and so on and so forth. Can you make it clear, in concrete terms, what the situation is if kids are being tested at home or in school and what should happen?

Nick Gibb: If they are tested in school, which is supervised in a testing system, and they test positive, they and their contacts will be required to self-isolate. They should not then proceed to obtain a PCR test. That positive stands. Even if they did go and get a PCR test and that tested negative, the positive test taken in the school counts. By contrast, after the first three tests, students will be given home kits to test themselves twice weekly at home. If those tests prove positive, they will be required to seek a PCR test. If that PCR test is negative, the student can return to school, and so can their contacts.

Q1334 **Chair:** The Minister said yesterday that a subsequent negative result would not allow pupils whose lateral flow test was positive to return to school. That is not correct?

Nick Gibb: That is correct. If the test was taken in school, that is absolutely correct; a subsequent PCR test testing negative will not take precedence over the lateral flow test that proved positive, if taken under supervised conditions in the school.

Chair: Okay. If you could set out to the Committee what you have just said in a letter, that would be helpful, just to be clear.

Nick Gibb: I would be very happy to do that.

Q1335 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** If I understood you right, you were saying that if someone has a lateral flow test that is done properly, essentially, under supervision, and it comes back positive, regardless of subsequent PCR testing they would still be excluded from school and need to isolate.



Nick Gibb: Yes.

Q1336 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** When I was given my box of lateral flow tests as a member of the NHS workforce, I was specifically told, having contracted Covid, not to use the test for 90 days, because if I did that within the 90 days I might have a false positive result. How will we manage those children who may test positive on the lateral flow for up to three months afterwards? Will they be required to miss that much school and, if so, what additional educational provision do you have in place for them?

Nick Gibb: I met a student on Friday for whom that had happened. We are veering slightly beyond my remit. I will write to the Committee on that so we get it absolutely right about what happens for those students who have tested positive at some point within 90 days.

Q1337 **Chair:** There is a lot of confusion about the lateral flow tests and the PCR tests, and the positives and the negatives, and whether they are done at school or at home, and whether there is a different outcome for those students in terms of whether they can attend school or not.

Nick Gibb: On that issue I think it is clear. If you take the test in school, that test stands, notwithstanding a PCR. If you take the test at home, and then you subsequently have a negative PCR test, then the negative PCR test stands. There is a separate issue that Caroline raised about those who have tested positive within the previous 90 days. I will write to the Committee about that.

Q1338 **David Johnston:** It was raised with me by some heads this morning that some parents are issuing what they are calling a notice of liability about the face mask guidance, and asking head teachers not to have children wear those face masks. The point was made by the heads that, because it is guidance rather than statutory, when a head teacher decides that they do need them based on the DfE's guidance they are getting quite challenging, some might say threatening, letters from certain parents who disagree with the stance, ordering them, if you like, to desist. It might not be something that you can answer at this point, but I think it might be worth the DfE looking at this issue, because certainly some heads are finding the position they are in quite difficult.

Chair: Just to reiterate, I have had the same situation in my constituency, with parents vigorously challenging the heads saying that guidance is guidance, it is not regulation or law. What on earth does the head teacher do if he feels that he wants masks and the parent is challenging that decision?

Nick Gibb: Whenever these new challenges arise for schools we always, through our regional teams and then issuing revisions to our guidance, support head teachers in how they tackle those challenges. We will do that.



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On the general point about face masks being worn in classrooms in secondary schools, all I would say to parents is that it is very important that we all do everything we can to keep Covid out of the classroom. That is what the hygiene, the ventilation, the one-way systems and the bubbles are about. These are all measures that schools have put in place very successfully in order to reduce the risk of transmission in the schools. It is beholden on all of us, including our children, to do everything we can to keep everyone safe and to keep other people safe.

I would say to parents that you should allow your child to wear a face mask in the classroom, because it protects the other children in the classroom, and also may well prevent your child from having to self-isolate because somebody near them has tested positive for Covid. It is terribly important. The guidance is very clear for schools that there is a system of controls that are recommended, and schools are expected to put those systems of controls in place to keep their school secure.

Q1339 Chair: Have you assessed the impact of mask wearing on pupils and their mental health, behaviour and learning? Have you done that alongside the assessment of where you think it is necessary in terms of Covid?

Nick Gibb: You are required by law to wear a face mask on public transport if you are over the age of 11. From that there are exemptions, children with special needs who cannot wear them for various medical or other reasons. Those same exemptions will apply.

Q1340 Chair: Have you made any assessment of the impact of mask wearing in the classroom on the kids, their wellbeing, mental health, learning and so on?

Nick Gibb: It will be based on the evidence that we are given by Public Health England, which advises that masks should be worn in classrooms.

Q1341 Chair: That is a different issue. There is an issue in terms of Covid. That is absolutely understood. All I am asking is whether there has been any similar analysis done on the impact in classrooms, on what effect mask wearing has in terms of behaviour, mental health and any other impact it might have on students.

Nick Gibb: To be absolutely accurate, I will write to you about that. We know, of course, that it is not as easy to teach when everyone is wearing a face mask, but we are in extraordinary times and we have to do everything we can to minimise the risk of transmission.

Chair: No one is arguing that; it is a separate point. Those things need to be considered side by side.

Q1342 Jonathan Gullis: The face mask debate, I will spare myself that one today. I am probably on a different side from the Minister on that perspective.

I am interested, Minister, in your relationship now with the National



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Education Union, seeing as Dr Mary Bousted said on Times Radio that she thought she got this one wrong regarding lateral flow testing and getting kids back into school. Are we now seeing a new and improved relationship once again between the NEU and the DfE? Are we no longer seeing what looked to me throughout this conflict like a them-versus-us mentality? Are we now all one, big, happy family?

Chair: Interestingly, the head of ASCL, Geoff Barton, has said, I think, that he is opposed to mask wearing in schools. He has very grave concerns about it.

Nick Gibb: On Mary Bousted's comments on Times Radio, I pay tribute to Mary, not on the specific issue but more generally about that approach to the conduct of debate in public life and politics. I have always taken that view towards a confrontational approach, the unnecessary division when there really is not division of opinion on issues. Even when there is a division of opinion, we should be debating these issues in a civilised, grown-up way, using moderate language, because we live in a democracy. We are all in politics because we want to do the best. There will be differences of opinion, as we have just heard between Jonathan and I on face masks, but we should be debating these things in a civil way and, if we are wrong on something, be prepared to admit it. I pay tribute to Mary, frankly, for the approach she took in that interview, and I think all of us can learn from that.

Q1343 **Chair:** I pay tribute to you, Nick, because whatever our disagreements, you always come to the Committee and we always debate these things. I really respect you, and I think all of us do.

Last week, in a speech to the Foundation for Education Development, the Secretary of State was talking about the £10 million for behaviour hubs. Could you explain very briefly what they are, how they work, why it costs £10 million and how they are going to be judged in terms of achieving the results that the Secretary of State explained?

Nick Gibb: Behaviour hubs follow the same model as maths hubs, which was the first hubs programme. It is about disseminating best practice in a school-led, teacher-led system. We have English hubs, and we have modern foreign language pedagogy hubs as well. It does cost money, some modest money—because you are releasing teachers, and those teachers' time has to be backfilled—in order to spread the evidence-based approach. In this instance you are talking about how you instil behaviour systems in schools. I am a huge fan of the hubs model in taking an evidence-based approach.

Q1344 **Chair:** What do they do, exactly? Give a practical example. Do you send out a group of civil servants to a school, or do teachers go from one school to another? How does it work?

Nick Gibb: It is based on experienced teachers or head teachers who are able to advise another school on the evidence-based approach, in this instance, to how to put in behaviour systems.



Q1345 **Chair:** The £10 million, what is that money spent on, exactly?

Nick Gibb: It is generally spent on paying for the time of those teachers to disseminate that best practice.

Q1346 **Chair:** Is it working?

Nick Gibb: It is early days for the behaviour hubs, it is a new hub, but the hubs programme itself is very successful in its concept. Maths hubs is the one that has been going for the longest, and we have seen a real improvement in maths teaching in this country as a consequence. You can see that in the national reference test that Ian Bauckham referred to earlier. We are seeing some major progress.

Q1347 **Chair:** Could you write to the Committee with a bit more detail and confirm that the bulk of that £10 million, say 90%, is spent on teachers' time? Is that what you are saying?

Nick Gibb: I cannot give you a precise percentage, but we will write to the Committee.

Q1348 **Chair:** Yes, and on what is being spent and on what. I will ask Simon Lebus or Ian Bauckham one last question. Did you consider at all the idea that I proposed in this meeting of external assessors going in to moderate teacher-assessed grades as part of your own research when you developed the system?

Simon Lebus: There was a lot of discussion about various different approaches to how we quality assure the work that was being done. In relation to sending externals in, as I recall from my exam board time, there are issues about getting people CRB checked, there are logistical issues and there are operational issues, so I do not think it was one of the main things that we considered from memory.

Q1349 **Chair:** Even with a few months' planning it could not have been done?

Simon Lebus: I think it would still have been quite problematic. We were also very aware that we did not want to disrupt still further the remaining school time. There is a big challenge that teachers already have in terms of recovering lost learning. We did not want to add to the bureaucracy and other additional burdens they were going to have to undertake because of the assessment.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much, all of you. I realise that whatever system it is will have flaws, but we have to question you because that is our job. As Nick said, we debate these issues very thoroughly. I really appreciate all the work you all do, Ofqual and the DfE. Thank you again, Nick, for appearing at our Committee on such a regular basis. It is much appreciated and I wish you all well.