

## Education Committee

### Oral evidence: Summer results 2021 and arrangements for 2022, HC 673

Tuesday 7 September 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 7 September 2021.

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; Kate Osborne; Christian Wakeford.

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#### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards, Department for Education; Susan Acland-Hood, Permanent Secretary, Department for Education; Simon Lebus, interim Chief Regulator, Ofqual; and Ian Bauckham, CBE, interim Chair, Ofqual.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Susan Acland-Hood, Simon Lebus and Ian Bauckham.

**Q1 Chair:** Good morning, everyone. Thank you very much for coming today. It is very nice to have this first Committee back properly in the room and particularly nice to see you, Minister, face to face, not just on a Zoom call. I reiterate that the Committee's view is that you could not be more accountable as a Minister by your regular attendances, possibly more than any other Minister in the Department, and it is much appreciated.

We have quite a lot to get through, so could I ask the witnesses to be as concise as possible? For the benefit of the tape and for those watching on the Parliament TV internet channel, can I ask you to introduce yourselves briefly and your titles? Are you happy to be addressed by first names? Thank you.

**Ian Bauckham:** I am interim Chair, Ofqual.

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

**Simon Lebus:** Interim Chief Executive of Ofqual.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Good morning. I am the Permanent Secretary in the Department for Education.

**Q2 Chair:** Thank you. We are going to start with some questions on Covid and schools and then move on to exams, so these questions will be directed predominantly at you, Minister, and possibly the Permanent Secretary.

Nick, do you agree with the JCVI decision not recommending vaccinations for 12 to 15-year-olds?

**Nick Gibb:** It is not for me to agree or disagree with the experts on that committee, but its view is clear that there are marginal health benefits for having 12 to 15 year-olds vaccinated. It has advised that we consult the CMOs, which is what we have done, and we await their response.

**Q3 Chair:** Its ultimate conclusion was not to recommend vaccines for 12 to 15-year-olds, is that correct?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, but it has advised us to consult the CMOs to look at the wider health benefits; for example, the health benefits of attending or not attending school. We know that there are mental health implications for children not attending school.

**Q4 Chair:** In the JCVI statement on 15 July, it said, "On top of existing routine programmes, a Covid-19 programme for children and young people is likely to be disruptive to education and will require more resource. The scale of additional resources required will be considerable." Have you calculated the costs, both in monetary value and disruption and diversion of staffing and other school resources, of the immunisation



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programme for Covid-19? In other words, what are the costs going to be to schools?

**Nick Gibb:** The schools are very used to immunisation programmes and this will be part of that school immunisations service programme. I do not anticipate it being a huge issue for schools. They are very used to doing it and if the decision is to proceed with vaccinations of 12 to 15-year-olds, the health secretary has already asked the NHS to prepare. Those preparations are already in train for the vaccinations to happen and I think that we will get through the whole population of 12 to 15-year-olds very swiftly if the decision is to go ahead with vaccination.

Q5 **Chair:** When the JCVI says that the scale of additional resources required will be considerable, you do not agree?

**Nick Gibb:** All I am saying is that whatever resources are needed will be met, but schools are well used to vaccinating their children and this will be part of that process.

Q6 **Chair:** Will an additional budget be given to schools if there is a big cost if a vaccination programme is decided—

**Nick Gibb:** I will bring in the Permanent Secretary on that point.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** As you would expect, given that the JCVI has asked the CMOs to look at this, we are making sure that we would be practically ready to do it if the recommendation was made to do it. The proposition is that we would do this through the School Age Immunisation Service, which is the service that is used to immunise children otherwise. That does not require additional resource from schools.

It does require some health resource and we are looking, with the Department of Health, at how it would make sure it could do this at the scale that would be required. Since the recommendation was made on 16 and 17-year-olds, we have already seen 50% of 16 and 17-year-olds vaccinated, and that recommendation was only made a matter of a few weeks ago. We are reasonably confident that this could be done quickly and managed well.

Q7 **Chair:** When it says, “The scale of additional resources required will be considerable”, what does it mean by that?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** What it is saying is that clearly you would have to put more resource into the School Age Immunisation Service from the health side in order to make sure you were doing this alongside all of the other vaccinations, exactly as we have as we have vaccinated the rest of the population. I do not think that it is talking about school resources.

Q8 **Chair:** If there is an extra financial resource for schools, will schools be given extra financial support to pay for this?



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**Nick Gibb:** As the Permanent Secretary says, we do not think it requires extra resource at the school level. This will be—

**Chair:** But if it does, if they need extra financial support, will there be extra funds to support it?

**Nick Gibb:** Of course, we keep all these issues under review and you will know that we have provided extra resources to schools. For example, through the Covid testing regime we have provided resources for that. We keep it under review, but as this is an NHS-driven programme, we do not think that schools themselves will need more resources for it.

Q9 **Chair:** The Secretary of State for Education said last week that if the JCVI does reach a decision that children should be able to receive vaccinations—and okay, they have not—parental consent would always be asked before they receive that vaccine. He also said, “It would be reassuring for parents to have that choice as to whether children would be able to have that vaccine but it always has to be based upon parental consent.” In relation to the Covid-19 vaccination programme, the NHS website says that it would rarely be appropriate or safe for a child to consent without a parent’s involvement and a parent’s consent must be sought prior to vaccination. Do you agree with your Secretary of State that parents should give consent before their children are vaccinated?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, the consent from parents will always be sought before a child is vaccinated in the school.

Q10 **Chair:** Nadhim Zahawi said on Sunday that the students would be able to overrule the parents.

**Nick Gibb:** There are long-established vaccination programmes for all types of vaccinations in schools and these issues are not new. Those administering the vaccines do have special training for vaccinating this age group, and in some circumstances—and it is rare—children can consent themselves if they are competent to do so. The people administering the vaccines in schools are aware of these sensitive issues.

Q11 **Chair:** Just to understand, will the parents have full consent or not? There will always be exceptional circumstances for parents in very troubling circumstances, I understand that, but on the whole is it your clear view, as the Secretary of State said, that parental consent would always be asked before they receive their vaccine and it has to be based on parental consent?

**Nick Gibb:** We will always seek the consent of parents before vaccinations happen in schools but, as I said, these are sensitive issues. The School Age Immunisation Service is very aware of the consent issues and in rare circumstances with previous vaccination programmes—

Q12 **Chair:** What are those rare circumstances? Give me an example where there would not be parental consent?



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**Nick Gibb:** Where the parent consents but the child is Gillick competent to make a decision themselves. What would happen in those circumstances is that there will be discussions between the school and the parent in resolving those issues. Those are the kinds of issues that—

Q13 **Chair:** Is it not the case that Gillick and later case law were intended for a far more narrow set of circumstances than a mass rollout treatment of otherwise healthy children?

**Nick Gibb:** These are issues that the School Age Immunisation Service is aware of. These are experienced practitioners who know how to deal with these issues and there will be further advice on these issues once a decision is made.

Q14 **Chair:** It is very important to parents, and you have Gavin Williamson saying that it always has to be based on parental consent. That is what the Secretary of State said last week, “always has to”, yet a health Minister says no, it is not based on parental consent. You are saying, “Yes, parental consent, but”. Can you understand why parents are confused as to what the position is?

**Nick Gibb:** The position is that we will always seek the consent of parents. This is an important programme. If a decision is made to proceed with it, we, all of us, need to be careful with the language we are using and how much we focus on this issue. Children and parents having a different view about whether they want to have a vaccination programme is a rare issue. The health professionals who administer vaccination programmes in schools are very experienced in dealing with these issues, and I think that we should leave the process to them and not escalate this into a—

Q15 **Chair:** The Secretary of State says it always has to be based on parental consent and you are not saying that?

**Nick Gibb:** I am saying that parental consent will always be sought. There are sensitive issues when parents and children disagree and where the child has Gillick competence, but these are rare circumstances from experience of past immunisation programmes. They have to be dealt with sensitively. I don't think that we should escalate it into a big political issue. All of us have a responsibility to make sure that this vaccination programme is a success. We have experienced health professionals who are well versed in dealing with these issues in schools.

**Chair:** I think that the vaccine programme has been incredible. I am proud to have had my vaccine, so I am very clear where I stand on it. I also believe that it should be absolutely clear to parents whether they have parental consent or not and that has not happened. The Secretary of State says yes, it always has to be based on parental consent. The health Minister says no, it does not have to be based on parental consent. You say yes, but exceptional circumstances or rare circumstances. Caroline wants to come in on this point.



Q16 **Dr Johnson:** It is just a quick question, Minister. Is it, therefore, your intention that if the chief medical officer recommends vaccinations for 12 to 15-year-olds these vaccines will all be delivered in schools?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, that is the intention. The School Age Immunisation Service will deliver these vaccinations through the schools. It is the swiftest and most efficient way of delivering the vaccination programme, as with other vaccination programmes for that age group.

Q17 **Dr Johnson:** The chief medical officer, having decided there is no significant medical reason to vaccinate the children for their benefit, has been asked to look at the wider perspective around vaccinations and, in particular, the potential for educational disruption. It is believed that half of children have now already had coronavirus at some point in the last year or so and vaccination is not going to reduce transmission significantly. If you now get coronavirus you have to isolate for 10 days, which is a maximum of eight days missing school. You are unlikely to get it a second time. Then the children who have been in close contact no longer have to isolate. Given that you do not have to isolate if you are a close contact and you only have to isolate if you are the half of children who have not had it who get it, and only probably once, is there, in your view, going to be any significant disruption to children's education?

**Nick Gibb:** I think so. I think that there could be and that is what we are trying to avoid. This is why we are seeking the advice of the chief medical officers from the four nations. You have the advantage over me that you are a doctor, a clinician, but we do know that there are health issues as well from not being in school. We know that children suffer mental health problems from not being in school. If the figure that you cite about the proportion of children who already have the antibodies is correct, that still leaves the other half of the 4 million 12 to 15 year-olds who do not have those antibodies, who may contract the virus, and who may then be off school.

**Dr Johnson:** For eight days.

**Nick Gibb:** Well, even one extra day can have an important impact on a child's education.

Q18 **Dr Johnson:** Will you be asking the chief medical officer to look at the rules as they are now or a hypothetical for rules as they may be in the future that he does not know what the changes may or may not be? For example, when you are looking at the broad perspective, is it based on the idea that half of children may have a maximum of eight days off or are you asking him to look at the changes that you think might occur?

**Nick Gibb:** This is why we are seeking the advice of the CMOs. You are asking me to opine on what are essentially medical matters and—

**Dr Johnson:** I am asking you what he has been asked to look at. Is he being asked to look on the basis of no isolation for contacts and effectively a maximum of one eight-day block off school with a positive



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PCR test, or is he being asked to look at wider changes as would hypothetically occur in the event that politicians made a decision to make the restrictions on children more stringent in the future?

**Nick Gibb:** We are asking the CMOs to use their experience of the wider health implications of Covid and the wider implications of children not having a vaccine versus them having the vaccine. That takes into account their assessment of what the disruption will be to children as a consequence of the route of the pandemic. They are better qualified than I am to assess what they believe is the future route of the pandemic. Based on their advice, we will decide whether or not to proceed with vaccinating 12 to 15-year-olds.

Q19 **Chair:** Finally on this point, before I come to exams, it is the Government's intention, as they have said, to get rid of bubbles. In fact, the statements you put out just before the half term said that schools should return to almost pre-pandemic behaviours. Is that correct?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, we are getting rid of bubbles. We are not getting rid of issues such as ventilation. It is important that schools continue to keep windows and doors open to allow that free flow of air. We are supplying 300,000 CO2 monitors to schools and colleges and—

Q20 **Chair:** You will be aware of reports in the papers today about some schools reintroducing bubbles. Why would that be the case, given that you have specifically said that this is not necessary anymore?

**Nick Gibb:** Our recommendation is very clear that bubbles are not required in schools. Since 16 August it has not been necessary for children to self-isolate if they are a close contact of somebody who has contracted Covid, so there is no real reason for schools to maintain the bubble arrangements. The decision that we have taken is based on a balance of where we are with Covid, where we are with the very successful vaccination programme, with 88% of adults having had at least one dose and 78% having had two doses, which means—

Q21 **Chair:** If schools are reintroducing bubbles and sending lots of pupils home, what will you do about it?

**Nick Gibb:** It is not the advice that we are giving to schools. We have regional schools commissioners in all our regions, and they will be talking to schools about the—

Q22 **Chair:** Are you going to monitor this to see what is going on?

**Nick Gibb:** We do, of course.

Q23 **Chair:** Will you intervene as the DfE or as a Minister?

**Nick Gibb:** Our regional schools commissioners will have discussions. There is a contingency—

Q24 **Chair:** If they are local authority schools, will the DfE intervene directly?



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**Nick Gibb:** Our regional schools commissioners are monitoring these positions, as they have been doing since the beginning of the pandemic. We do have a contingency framework, however, for areas such as the south-west, where there are already very high infection rates in the community. In those areas, the directors of public health have given the schools the powers to re-impose some—

**Chair:** Some of this is happening elsewhere—

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, in the south-west in particular where there are high levels of infection.

Q25 **Chair:** Yes, but I am talking about other places. I just want to know if you would ring up the head teachers and ask them why this is happening.

**Nick Gibb:** We will. The regional schools commissioners—

**Chair:** Would you do it as well?

**Nick Gibb:** No, the regional schools commissioners will be phoning up, will be talking. They are in constant touch with their schools and they have been throughout the pandemic to make sure that schools are not, for example, closing unnecessarily or sending home too many children as—

Q26 **Chair:** If it comes to be much more widespread, what will you do about it then?

**Nick Gibb:** We keep these issues under review, but I am not going to give you decisions about hypothetical cases happening in the future. We keep it under review. We have very close contact with schools through the regional schools commissioner network. That will continue.

Q27 **Chair:** In a nutshell, it remains your view that schools for the most part should return to the way they were pre-pandemic?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes. I visited a primary school in Portsmouth last week and the children were very excited to be back. The school wants there to be normality, but they are maintaining all the hygiene, the handwashing, the cleaning of surfaces, the ventilation rules, the face coverings on school transport and so on. The Government advice remains to use face coverings in areas where there are confined spaces.

Q28 **Chair:** Thank you. I am going to ask you a few questions on exams now and then pass over to my colleagues.

In March 2021, when you came to our Committee and we asked you about the possibility of widespread grade inflation, you said, "I think we can be reassured that we have a good system in place, and then there are 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 any way. We know that higher proportions of students have achieved top grades this year. We know that there has been a significant amount of grade inflation: 44.3% of A-level results achieved



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an A or an A\* compared to 25.2% in 2019. Do you accept that the Department's response to grades contributed to this hard rock cake of grade inflation? What specifically do you think were the driving factors?

**Nick Gibb:** Just as a quick reality check, you are right that the 44% of A-level awards were at grade A or above. That is up six percentage points on 2020. At GCSE, 30% of grades were at grade 7 or above, and that is a 2.4 percentage point increase on 2020. There are high proportions of grades but bear in mind this is a teacher-assessed system. There is a very clear quality assurance process that we put in place, a lot of thought and effort. We had a huge consultation with stakeholders on this to get this as right as we could. The best system, of course, is our exams, but we could not have exams. They would not have been fair this year.

I think that we have put in place a process that is the next best thing to exams. All those grades are backed up by the evidence that teachers have produced, and it is teachers who know their pupils best. They are the best people to provide an estimate of the grades. There is a formal declaration by head teachers that the processes have properly been adhered to. There is a huge amount of guidance supplied by the exam boards about what evidence should look like for those grades.

Q29 **Chair:** But you accept that there has been significant grade inflation since 2019?

**Nick Gibb:** There has. There are higher proportions of grades at the top levels, I absolutely accept that. The biggest increase was in 2020 and there has been another increase but of a smaller scale in 2021 compared to 2020.

Q30 **Chair:** Do you not think that there is a potential for these qualifications to be devalued by employers unless you get to grips with grade inflation?

**Nick Gibb:** No. We have been very clear that those qualifications are absolutely valid and they should have the value among employers, colleges and universities as in previous years. Every grade is supported by very clear evidence that the teachers have compiled. Every school has to supply a sample of that evidence to the exam boards, and then the exam boards looked at a sample of schools to make sure that evidence was right. In 85% of cases the evidence supported the grade. In the remaining 15% there was further investigations, but a very small proportion of grades were ultimately altered. Less than 1% of grades were ultimately altered as a consequence of the process.

Q31 **Chair:** Can I ask Ofqual if it is happy about the grade inflation? You do not think it is a problem, nothing to worry about?

**Simon Lebus:** I have said pretty much from the off that we were likely to get a rise and some upward pressure on the overall pattern of outcomes. There are several reasons for that.



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One of them is the benefit of the doubt effect, which I and colleagues have described before. You have a class of 30 students. The teacher comes in at the beginning of the year and knows that five of those students are capable of getting an A in their exams but in reality probably only three of them will because they will be subject to the hazards of the exam room. They will fail to revise properly. They will be examined on bits of the curriculum they have not covered or have not covered very effectively.

This year the construct was that students would only be assessed on what they had been taught and what they had learned, so they were being assessed on a more restricted volume of content. They were being assessed in the context of the benefit of the doubt.

Q32 **Chair:** We get all that, but the schools Minister implied that there would be nothing that went wrong with the system.

**Simon Lebus:** I think that you are talking about—

**Chair:** When we raised grade inflation with you, you seemed to say that you did not think it was going to be too much of a problem, and clearly it is a problem.

**Nick Gibb:** It has risen, as I said, by those points, six percentage points at A level and 2.4 percentage points at GCSE in the top grades.

Q33 **Chair:** Compared to 2019 a whacking great rise. You have turned the exam system into an “all must have prizes” approach, in essence.

**Simon Lebus:** They were not exams this year, were they? They were teacher-assessed grades, and I think that is the point that one needs to take into account.

**Chair:** You have turned a qualification system into an “all must have prizes” because—

**Simon Lebus:** No. All need grades in order to be able to progress to the next stage of their education or training.

Q34 **Chair:** People like Sir Jon Coles warned that this was going to happen and urged some kind of standardised assessment.

**Simon Lebus:** I think that we have to recognise also that in 2020 the effort was made to replicate the grade outcomes that you saw in 2019 and that was not well accepted because it took agency from the students. We needed a system that would accommodate the very different learning experiences that students had had. It was based on an approach using teacher-assessed grading, which is essentially different to exams. You would expect to get a rather different sort of result.

So far as employers are concerned, we have had extensive liaison with all the major employer groups. We have talked to them about the approach that has been adopted. I think that they are generally understanding and supportive of that. In terms of where we go from now, we have also



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talked about that and I think they recognise that these years were highly unusual and unusual methods were required.

Q35 **Chair:** Given that you have had higher numbers of pupils achieving top grades compared with previous years and that that will mean a big increase in the number of these students going to university, have you made an assessment of the impact of the year's higher grades—and I realise that this may not be your area—on higher education dropout rates? It is likely that there will be a significant increase in dropout. What additional support will be there for disadvantaged students? If you do not want to answer, I am very happy if the Minister sends a letter to the Committee, but clearly this could be a problem.

**Nick Gibb:** We have been working very closely with the university sector throughout the year. They were very aware of the process that we were introducing for teacher-assessed grades this year, and they have worked extremely well with the Department in making sure that we can get young people who have the grades into university places. We raised the cap, as you know, on medical places from 7,571 in 2019 to over—

Q36 **Chair:** What are you going to do to help those students who drop out?

**Nick Gibb:** I will come on to that. If you look at the Student Loans Company withdrawal rates, we have not seen large numbers of withdrawals from the Student Loans Company as a consequence of the 2020 admissions. Of course, universities, colleges and sixth forms are all aware of the experience that students have had in the past year and that they will not necessarily have covered the whole curriculum. They will adapt their initial teaching to that. On top of that, of course, we have the £3 billion catch-up programme and the 16—

Q37 **Chair:** We are going to come on to that. I have a couple more questions before I pass to my colleagues.

I mentioned in the House of Commons yesterday to the Secretary of State that the attainment gap between boys and girls is widening with these latest results: 62.3% of boys receiving A to C grades at GCSE but 74% of girls receiving the same results. There are loads of other figures set out by Mary Curnock Cook, writing for HEPI, and concerns about the lower numbers of male pupils taking A-levels and an increase in A\* and A attainment since 2019 for female candidates. What are you going to do to ensure that boys are not left behind? What is your response to this? What is the plan of action to solve this problem?

**Nick Gibb:** First of all, don't forget, these are not standardised exams. This year and last year these were a different set of circumstances and we just needed to make sure we got all young people on to the next phase of their education. I think that it is wrong to draw broader conclusions from the outcome of this year and last year, which are almost certainly due to the way we have had to ensure children get grades. Since 2010, we have been concerned about attainment gaps in all



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different groups and that has been the driving force of our education reform policy.

I will give you one example. After the reforms to reading, the phonics that we introduced back in 2010, the 2016 PIRLS showed that we scored our highest ever score for nine-year-olds' reading ability across that international study. One of the main drivers of that was an improvement in boys' reading. We are absolutely driven as a government to addressing these attainment gaps.

**Q38 Chair:** No one will doubt, certainly in my view, that you have done extraordinary work on literacy in education that you will be long recognised for, but the fact is there is a wide gap between boys and girls. Surely you would be looking at that specifically and thinking this is not just something that has happened under Covid, it has been growing over the past years but exacerbated by the assessment system, rather than saying this is down to the assessment system.

**Nick Gibb:** Let me give you some information. At A-level in 2020 there was a reverse in the previous trend with females now outperforming prior attainment-matched males, and compared to 2019 girls scored an average of two-tenths of a grade higher.

**Chair:** I am talking about GCSEs: 62% of boys receiving A to C grades at GCSE, 74% of girls receiving the same results.

**Nick Gibb:** It has widened. The negative gap for male candidates at grade 7 at GCSE has widened by 2.1 percentage points, though it has narrowed by 2.6 percentage points at grade 4 compared to 2019.

**Q39 Chair:** You do not think this is a problem, 62% of boys getting it, 74% of girls, I think over 10% behind?

**Nick Gibb:** Any attainment gap is something that we take extremely seriously, and we will continue to look at the reasons for the attainment gap changing in 2021 and 2020. The reasons will be different because it will almost certainly be dependent on the processes that are peculiar to this year and last year. We take the attainment gap among all different groups very seriously as a wider policy implication, but I don't think you can draw too many conclusions about the wider education policy issues from this year and last year. You have to look at those figures in a normal year when we have exams, and those issues we are addressing.

Everything about our reform programme, whether it is a knowledge-based curriculum, whether it is reform to GCSEs and A-levels, whether it is all the school improvements we are doing, we are proud of the fact that when we came to office 68% of schools were good or outstanding; now it is 86%. We are continuing to push to get the remaining 14% of schools—

**Q40 Chair:** The attainment gap and these kinds of problems were stalling and getting worse. Despite having gone up since 2010, it then started to slip



and get worse pre-Covid.

**Nick Gibb:** We look at all those issues. For example, on the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and non-disadvantaged, we closed that by 13% up to Covid in primary.

**Chair:** No, it stalled in 2019.

**Nick Gibb:** It is still around 13% and secondary school 9%. Even if it has plateaued for a couple of years, it is still significantly better than it was in 2010. We are looking at the reasons for why it has not continued to close, and that is why it is so important that we continue the reform programme that we have put in place in the years ahead, not stall the reform programme but drive it further forward. That is why we are engaged at the moment in major reforms in initial teacher training.

Q41 **Chair:** As my final question at this stage, on the arrangements for next year, just before the summer you and the Secretary of State set out how you think exams should go ahead next year. I said that in essence what you are doing is reducing a 100-metre race to a 50-metre race while keeping all pupils at the same starting point, whatever their disadvantage. You are not going to help those people who have learned the least because you are levelling down, basically, for everyone but not taking into account the individual circumstances. Your response was that the catch-up fund would support those disadvantaged pupils to help them to catch up.

The issue is that still 44% of students receiving the pupil premium have been missed thus far in the catch-up fund. There is significant regional disparity. For my colleagues in the north-east, there has only been 58% of catch-up in the north-east, whereas it is almost 100% in the south-west. As I say, all you are doing is turning a 100-metre race into a 50-metre race but you will not help those who start the race who have had significant disadvantages.

**Nick Gibb:** First of all, the catch-up programme is extensive, and I know that you are going to talk about that later, the £3 billion catch-up programme and a tutoring revolution. We also know that children being back in school is probably the biggest catch-up programme that there is. We see from the Renaissance Learning evidence that just being in school will help to close that lost education due to Covid.

I think the adaptations that we are introducing for 2022 are important and they will help address that differential experience that children have had. If the differences are too big and if we continue to see disruption to children's education in this academic year, then that is a different issue. We have a contingency plan that we will be publishing very shortly about that.

For example, all the adaptations in advance information, optionality, and exam aids will give confidence and will help children. They will help disproportionately those children who have had a higher level of



disruption in the last academic year. If, for example, you have already covered the whole curriculum and you are well versed in the whole curriculum, you will have some advantage in having advanced notice. If you have only covered a portion of the curriculum, the advantage to you will be greater proportionately in that the teachers can focus the revision on the areas that they know will come up in the exam. These are important adaptations to reflect the disruption that young people have faced over the last 18 months.

**Q42 Christian Wakeford:** In regards to the published information saying that over 1,100 centres were scrutinised by awarding bodies, what was the actual composition of the random sample? Was it representative of the wider exam centres?

**Simon Lebus:** Yes, it was. There were two elements of the sample. One was high-risk centres, things like new risk centres or centres where there had been a problem. The awarding bodies were also looking at centres where there was a big disjunct between their historic grades and the grades they were putting in. I think that the threshold they set there was 10%. Then the other bucket of centres that was looked at was a representative "random" sample; in other words, the sample was divided according to school types and then there was a random generation within particular school types. Yes, all centre types were looked at.

**Q43 Christian Wakeford:** In regards to all centre types, was there also a regional variance in that as well? I am thinking that obviously the north-west, the north-east and so on were hardest hit in terms of missed education.

**Simon Lebus:** That was why I said "random" was in inverted commas. Yes, what we tried to do was get a sample that was representative but mixed up all types of centres. We wanted to make sure that there was proper regional and centre-type representation so that we were looking at a good, reliable and accurate cross-section.

**Q44 Christian Wakeford:** Given that roughly 15% of centres that were scrutinised did not satisfy the subject experts that their evidence supported the TAGs, what consideration did you give to introducing more widespread quality assurance checks?

**Simon Lebus:** Well, 15% of the 20% that were scrutinised, it was not that they did not satisfy the scrutineers, it was that they looked at it further because of some of the things that needed explaining. Either they had not followed the policy properly or there was some disjunct between the evidence that was submitted and the grades that were arrived at.

We were under a heavy time constraint. The assessed grades were put in on 16 June to the exam boards and we wanted to make sure that the bulk of the work was done by the end of the summer term so further demands were not made on teachers and centres. That was one of the constraints we had. The other was that we wanted to make sure that



there were proper, well-qualified expert examiners to look at the material.

Trying to contextualise the results of that quality assurance process, the results are rather in line with the historic experience last year in terms of where there were issues. That gives me some comfort that this was an appropriate level of scrutiny and that the process, in fact, worked quite well. All the evidence and the feedback that we had from exam boards and the senior examiners was that the evidence that was looked at supported the grades that were being recommended.

**Q45 Christian Wakeford:** In regards to the detailed analysis that Ofqual normally makes available each year for the week that exam results are released, why was this information not released for this year at the same time?

**Simon Lebus:** I think that we make the detailed analysis of quality assurance available in December because what we try to do is make sure that all the information about malpractice, appeals and so on is put there together. Obviously, the appeals process is still going on, so we will be publishing final information in December. I am not aware of what gets published in a normal year about quality assurance on results day.

**Q46 David Johnston:** I have a couple of questions for the Minister first. One of the things that concerned people about the results was the gap between private schools and state schools. The first results we got were A-levels saying that whereas top grades had gone up 6% in the state sector, they had gone up 9% in the independent sector. It seems to me one thing to suggest that private schools minimised learning loss during the pandemic but quite another to suggest that it improved their performance.

There is a lot of focus now on a widened attainment gap. I wonder whether you feel that those grades actually represent the gap between the independent and state sectors because of the differential learning loss that happened, or whether you feel that if we had a normal year of exams now you would immediately see a closing of the gap—not totally because the gap is a longstanding problem—because perhaps the grades given in the independent sector might have been even more inflated than they were in some state schools.

**Nick Gibb:** The independent sector starts from a higher base. Take a normal exam year, 2019. The independent sector, which is largely selective—they select their pupils by ability—achieved 44% of A and A\* grades at a time when in the secondary comprehensive sector it was 20%, which is not selective. If you then look at the 2020 or 2021 figures, if you look at the percentage increase of that proportion, you see that for the independent sector the increase in the proportion of A grades goes up by 15.2% between 2020 and 2021 and by 18% among comprehensive schools. I do not think there is anything in the TAG system that has done



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anything other than reflect the system that we had when we had ordinary exams.

Q47 **David Johnston:** Okay, so conceivably it could be that sort of gap when we return to normal exam years?

**Nick Gibb:** Everything we have been trying to do in all our reforms has been to make the state sector competitive with the independent sector. Until we had Covid, you saw that gap between the top grades achieved in the independent sector and the top grades achieved in the state sector narrowing each year. Of course, we have had a different matter with these last two years, but I intend us to get back to that system where we are continually improving the state sector through our school improvement programme, the academies programme, the free schools programme, all the things that we are doing about behaviour in schools and so on, so that we can continue that process of narrowing the gap between the independent sector and the state sector.

If you look at the proportion of applicants now from the state sector getting into Russell Group universities, Oxford and Cambridge, and you see schools like Brampton Manor in East London sending more young people to Oxford and Cambridge than Eton, that never used to happen before this Government came into office. We will continue that remorseless approach to raising standards and aspiration in our state schools that we had before Covid.

Q48 **David Johnston:** This is a final question on that point before I ask Ian and Simon something.

One of the things that has been widely reported is parents thinking they need to move their children into the independent sector. There have been all sorts of stories, people saying they have kept a full timetable and so on. When you see top grades, which I think is A\*, A and B, go up from 61% to 70%—no one has done exams but 61% to 70% in the independent sector—that might push more people to think that if they send their child there, they are going to get much better grades. I personally think that it is questionable that there would be that sort of increase in a normal exam year, more than questionable actually, and I wondered what you thought about that. Obviously, parents are making decisions based on that data that we are seeing.

**Nick Gibb:** I would say look at the data in normal times and the way in which we are closing the gap between the independent sector and the state sector with those top grades. The proportionate increase, as I said earlier, is higher in comprehensive schools and FE colleges than it is in the independent sector between 2021 and 2020 and, indeed, between 2021 and 2019.

I would say to people to obviously choose whichever school they want to send their child to, it is up to the parents, but the changes that we have introduced since 2010, driving up standards in our state system, the higher proportion now of good and outstanding schools that we have



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today, 86%, compared with where we were in 2010, all the changes to the curriculum and the way we teach reading and maths, adopting the approach from south-east Asia in how we teach maths in primary schools, these are all driving up standards in our state sector. The lesson that I think comes from Covid is we have to get back to that reform programme and drive it even faster and even further when we return to normal education policy in the future.

**Q49 David Johnston:** Thank you. This question is to Ian and Simon now. You have to try to balance your statutory duty to maintain standards and public confidence in exams with the need to be fair to past and future cohorts. What is the process you are going to go through to balance those two things?

**Ian Bauckham:** When we consider the decisions that need to be taken for 2022, it is a slightly different situation to that that we faced in 2021, where we were operating specifically under a direction from the Secretary of State to prioritise the awarding of grades based on teacher judgment over maintaining the grade profile in previous years. Clearly, going forward, for decisions that we have to take in 2022, there is a range of interests, considerations and risks to consider.

One of those is the risks associated with baking in the significant rise in high grades that we have seen in previous years, but there are also interests of fairness to students who are going through the examination system during the Covid period, but also those who went through examinations before and will go through examinations afterwards. We have to reach a view that balances all of those interests and make sure that we do something that is fair to all students but is acutely cognisant of the risks associated with baking in the grade inflation that has already been alluded to today.

We are going through a process on grading specifically of engagement with stakeholders and hope to announce a decision on this very shortly. As it happens, yesterday we met representatives of employers' organisations, who interestingly held a range of views. There was no strong consensus. There was certainly one view that spoke of the advantages of getting back to 2019 grading standards sooner rather than later. There were other views that said depending on the way in which the pandemic pans out it might be that a staged return to 2019 standards would be a better approach. All of them were united on the importance of clear communication to employers on the grading standard chosen and, therefore, what the grades actually mean to the users of them.

**Q50 David Johnston:** On your baking-in point, I know that one of the things that concerns people is, as you suggest, that you could end up making adjustments every single year based on trying to be fair to those who have had very different assessments done on them. Do you consider 2022 as the year when you make whatever adjustments you are going to make and then you end that process and in 2023 we would revert to 2019?



**Ian Bauckham:** The important task that we have ahead of us is re-establishing a firm, objective link between grades awarded and underlying standards achieved, and getting to the point where that can be done consistently into the future. I think that underpinning your previous question to the Minister was a question on whether or not the underlying trends in achievements this year were precisely reflected by the grade profile that we ended up with. I do not think that we can say that firmly this year. We need formal exams to get to that point, which is standardised across the country. Everybody does the same paper on the same day and it is centrally marked and relates to the actual standards achieved. That is the point we need to get back to. Whether we do that finally in 2022 and reach that point of stability then or whether we take a bit longer to do that will be the subject of the decision that we will be announcing later this autumn.

Q51 **David Johnston:** I am going to ask now a question I was going to ask later while we were on this topic: what is your data for assessing the differential learning loss that different groups have experienced in the pandemic in order to make these decisions? Because there you say you need standardised exams to understand it. You do not have those; what are you using?

**Ian Bauckham:** Absolutely. There is a lot of research being done on differential learning loss over the last year or so, and we are reviewing all the relevant research. We run something called the National Reference Test every year, which assesses the actual underlying standards achieved by the examination cohorts of the year 11, effectively, before their examinations in English and maths. We were able to carry out this assessment this year, albeit with a reduced number of schools participating. We do have some objective indication on what real underlying trends are.

Normally the National Reference Test is carried out in order to reflect any rises in actual underlying achievements in grading passes in any given year following examination. But clearly we did not have any examinations this year so we are not using it for that purpose. Once the data have been fully analysed we will be publishing that later in the autumn. That will give us some objective reference points on actual underlying standards.

**Simon Lebus:** We did also publish a literature review on learning loss in July, which is worth looking at and quite interesting because it is a fairly comprehensive review of the literature on learning loss. What is interesting about it, and perhaps not surprising, is it does reveal there is a highly disparate pattern across social groups and across localities, and it is very difficult to generalise even at a level as small as a region. It says you have to look at the local pattern on the ground, and even within different schools you can get different experiences. It makes the point that it is a complex problem. One has to be very mindful about the complexity and difficulty of designing a pathway back to normal.



Q52 **David Johnston:** Final two quick questions from me. When can we expect your decisions on what is going to happen in 2022? I think you said “shortly”.

**Ian Bauckham:** October.

Q53 **David Johnston:** Last question, what exactly are higher education and business reps saying to you about how they interpret these grades because we also had a shift to the 1-9 and some people want to see 1-9 pushed further. I always wondered whether business, in particular, would be able to interpret that, given that few in business have done those assessments. What are they saying about whether they can interpret the exam system today at all?

**Ian Bauckham:** Before I pass to Simon, I will say that interestingly our engagements exercise with business representatives yesterday singled out for praise the work we had done at communicating the change from the lettered scale to the numbered scale, and said that whatever decision is reached about grading for 2022 and going forward they would like to see a public information campaign of that sort because they felt that had been successful. We do think it is possible to communicate these changes, clearly providing we have enough lead-in time to do so, which is why there are no plans for a changing grading scale for 2022 because there simply would not be a long enough lead-in time to do that. Any change in grading scale is a long-term project and requires significant lead-in time to secure that confident knowledge.

**Simon Lebus:** We also conducted a YouGov survey of employers earlier in the year, who generally seemed fairly understanding of the fact that the grades this year are somewhat different. But the pattern with employers now is that they use a battery of measures in order to manage their recruitment, so they are generally not just relying on the public exam system. They are doing aptitude tests, they are looking at CVs, they do interviews obviously. They are recruiting in quite a complex way and employers groups have not expressed any great degree of discomfort about an ability to understand and get to grips with what has happened with the grading system this year. There is awareness of the fact there has been inflation but there is also awareness of the fact that the students this year and last year have had a particularly rough time and had to deal with some very challenging circumstances.

Similarly in HE, again there has been understanding of what has happened. They have had to develop their admissions offer strategy in order to accommodate the levels of grade inflation this year after last year.

Q54 **Ian Mearns:** Will you publish the result of that consultation with business groups? I would be interested to see what sort of businesses responded to that.

**Simon Lebus:** We can write you a note describing the interaction we have had. The consultation has been a series of stakeholder meetings so



it has not been a formal consultation where people have been on the record. But I am perfectly happy to send you details about some of the engagement we have had with employers and the sort of feedback we have on grading.

**Q55 Ian Mearns:** When you talk about engagement with meetings of that nature, stakeholder groups, are we talking about representative groups of employers as opposed to employers themselves or was it businesses?

**Simon Lebus:** No, it has mainly been representative groups of employers.

**Q56 Chair:** Just before I pass over to Kim and Tom, perhaps both of you—Ofqual and the Minister—can answer. I am just reinforcing David Johnston’s question that 39.5% of private school entrants achieved an A\* grade, and that was compared to 16.1% when exams were last sat in 2019. We know there was a huge differentiation between private schools and state schools, particularly in relation to A grades. Why has there been such a massive jump of 16% to 39.5% in A\* grades with private schools during the exams?

**Simon Lebus:** If you look at the 2019 outcome, 70% of independent school pupils got B, A or A\*. Fast forward two years, what has happened is most everybody moved up in that direction along the X axis, so there has been a general rise in grade standards. Of course because independent schools were already scoring a disproportionate number of the higher grades, there is nowhere for them to go up. There has been all this talk of A\*\*, but there is no A\*\* at the moment so they just get compressed up that end, but that movement along the right would—

**Chair:** It has gone from an escalated to a superpowered lift.

**Simon Lebus:** The movement has been common. We made a comment about a generally rising tide and again if you look at the relative increases, the largest increases for other centres, which were up 22.5%, secondary comprehensive 18.7%, the relative rise at independent centres and academies at grade A and above is 15.2% and 15.8%, so there has been a general floating upwards. The independents are because they started at a higher point.

**Q57 Chair:** The Minister has told me to look at research from the Sutton Trust in the past, which we hugely respect. Peter Lampl says that, “The Covid pandemic has widened the gulf between state and private schools and our research shows how much harder state schools, particularly those in less-affluent areas, have been hit by the pandemic and it has compounded the existing inequalities.” What would you say about that?

**Nick Gibb:** As Simon says, in terms of the grading all ships have floated and all types of centres—

**Chair:** They have had a superfast lift at the top of the skyscraper—

**Nick Gibb:** No, they have not.



**Chair:** —and the state schools have been on a fast escalator.

**Nick Gibb:** Comparing this year with last year, all types of schools have seen a higher proportion of top grades at both GCSE and A-level. The proportionate increase is less in the independent sector than it is in comprehensive schools and in FE colleges. That is the point that Simon was trying to make.

Q58 **Chair:** Their increase has been huge compared to As. The independent sector got huge amounts, and this is not to knock the independent sector in any shape or form, but there is a massive disparity between higher grades in private schools compared to state schools. I just quoted you some of them at the beginning of my question.

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, but they started from a higher base because they are selective. If you look at—

**Chair:** But they have gone from a higher base to a supersonic base.

**Nick Gibb:** No, not supersonic. They have gone up by the proportionate increase—the rate of change is 15% between 2020 and 2021.

**Chair:** But they have gone up more than double: 16.1% gaining A\* in 2019 and 39.5% A\* grade now.

**Nick Gibb:** Even between 2019 and 2021 the proportionate increase in the independent sector is lower than it is in the state sector. It is 38% between 2019 and 2021.

**Chair:** But you are looking at grades as a whole, I am talking about As and —

**Nick Gibb:** No, I am talking about top grades. It is a proportionate increase. The rate of change has been less in the independent sector than it has in comprehensive schools and all state sector schools. It is just that the independent sector, because it is selective, started from a higher base. Even in a normal exam year they achieve a higher proportion of top grades than the state sector, which is not selective, broadly speaking, across its range.

Q59 **Chair:** You disagree with Sir Peter Lampl saying there is a widening gap between—

**Nick Gibb:** I do agree that the consequence of the pandemic, rather than this awarding system, of course has hit children from more disadvantaged backgrounds harder than it has for children from more affluent backgrounds. If they have difficult home conditions, of course it is going to be harder to study at home. It is one of the reasons we put so much money into making sure that children have computers. Some 1.35 million computers were bought on the world market, built to order, shipped in and distributed to children and disadvantaged families in order to help address that.



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But even with all that support, and everything we have been doing with the National Academy and so on, children from disadvantaged backgrounds have suffered. You see it from the research we have been doing with Renaissance Learning.

**Chair:** The situation is all that is very good—I will pass over to Caroline who wants a question on this—but 70% of A-level results for private schools are A\* compared with 39% for comprehensive pupils, so what was that figure in 2019?

**Nick Gibb:** It was 44% for the independent sector and 20% for comprehensives.

**Chair:** So quite a big jump.

**Nick Gibb:** It is but if you calculate the percentage of that jump you will see that it is less in the independent sector than it is in the—

**Chair:** You are not worried about it all?

**Nick Gibb:** I do not think that fact reflects anything that is fundamentally wrong with the way we awarded grades this year. What I am always worried about is the difference between the independent sector and the state sector generally.

Q60 **Chair:** Are you not worried that the independent sector can get 70% of A\* A-levels and 39% in the state sector? Would you not want to improve that?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, I absolutely do.

**Chair:** Why cannot the state sector also get 70%?

**Nick Gibb:** Right from 2010 our drive has been to make the state sector as good as the independent sector, and that is what all our reforms are about. If you look at the way we have closed the gap between the independent sector's proportion of top grades and the state sector's proportion of top grades, that was closing up to Covid. We need to get back to that. All the reforms, all the controversy of our reforms, have been about driving up standards in the state sector. Our objective is to say to a parent, "You do not need to send your child to an independent school because the state school in your area is as good, if not better, than the independent schools." That has always been our drive. I can take you to schools around the country, free schools, academies, maintained schools that are as good as or better than.

**Chair:** There are remarkable state schools and I see them in my own constituency doing incredible things, sending people to Oxbridge. I absolutely accept that but the overall figure is something to be concerned about.

Q61 **Dr Johnson:** You have commented on the fact that independent sector schools do get better results in their exams and also that they are selective. Given that many children will enter the independent sector at



senior school, do you have any research or information on the children who have done key stage 2 SATs at the end of primary school and their comparable results at the end of their senior school in the independent and state sectors? If you do, and you can see that gap, what can you do to help state schools level up rather than hold the private schools back?

**Nick Gibb:** I do not know whether we have that particular data, we will write to you if we do. We will have a look at that to see what—

**Dr Johnson:** It is easy to say that it is due to selection, but if you look at comparable children at 11 going into the independent sector, you will be able to tell what is different.

**Nick Gibb:** It worries me particularly that there is evidence that very able children from disadvantaged backgrounds do not do as well at key stage 3 and 4 as similarly abled children from a more advantaged background. That has been a driving force for everything we have been doing since 2010. We want to close that attainment gap. It should not be the case that a bright child does not do as well as another bright child just because of their background. Or indeed whatever ability they are they should not do less well than a similar child from a different background.

As I said, we closed that attainment gap by 13% at primary and 9% at secondary but we have more to do. We have to close it further. All the reforms that we are introducing, all the things we are doing about the behaviour, all the issues with the EBacc, making sure that the opportunities that children from affluent backgrounds take for granted in the choice of subjects that they take at GCSE, making sure that we drive the uptake of the EBacc combination—maths, English, science, history, geography and a foreign language—that that continues to be the focus of the state sector.

Then all we are doing about making sure that 14% of schools that are not good or outstanding, we want to get that 14% down to zero. We just have to improve those remaining schools that are not performing as well as the rest. We are doing that.

Then all the reforms that we are now introducing at the moment in initial teacher training, just making sure that we are giving the best CPD, the best training to our very able graduates that come into teaching, making sure they have the best start in our school system. That is also a very important part of closing that attainment gap.

Q62 **Dr Johnson:** Do you think key stage 3 is where that gap starts to drift?

**Nick Gibb:** I do worry about key stage 3. Ofsted reported a couple of years ago about their concerns about key stage 3, and that is also a focus of the reform work that we are doing; making sure that the curriculum in key stage 3 is as demanding as it needs to be. That those years are not simply preparation for GCSE but there is a curriculum for key stage 3 in



its own right to help children to develop the knowledge and the reading skills and the mathematic skills that they need to succeed.

**Q63 Kim Johnson:** The teacher-assessed grades have disproportionately impacted some groups, and the Chair mentioned earlier the gap between boys and girls, but the attainment gap has also widened for black and poorer students. I just wanted for you to say what you intend to do to reduce that gap going forward, particularly next year?

**Nick Gibb:** It is an important question. At A-level, if you are looking at pupils with different characteristics, the picture has been one of stability generally and there is no evidence of bias in favour of any groups of students. Ofqual has conducted quite serious equalities research into that. Simon and Ian may want to say something about that.

There are some small changes. For example, compared to 2020 we saw 1.9 to 3 percentage point widening in the gaps between black Caribbean, black African and mixed white, and black Caribbean pupils and white British pupils in achieving top grades at A and A\*. But no statistically significant difference at the C grade. That is something that concerns us. We are looking at what the reasons are for that.

I said earlier, it is important not to draw wider education policy implications from disparities such as those that appear in 2021, possibly because of the approach we have taken to awarding grades in 2021. But speaking more generally, I am always concerned about disparities between different groups of pupils in our society. I said earlier, this is absolutely what we are—all our reforms are designed to try to close and eliminate those gaps. Whatever ethnic background a child comes from or whatever socioeconomic background those children come from, we have to make sure we are doing everything we can to close that attainment gap.

**Q64 Kim Johnson:** Can you disassociate in terms of the learning loss that has been brought forward because of the digital divide that has been experienced by a number of those students over the past 18 months? Will the research that has been undertaken by Ofqual look at some of those issues as well?

**Simon Lebus:** We published a fairly extensive equalities impact analysis on results day this year, as we did last year, and they do show some site variations. When we were making the arrangements for the teacher-assessment grading, as part of the process of looking at centre policies and recommending procedures and practice that centre should adopt, we did provide guidance on how to avoid bias and discrimination in making the teacher-assessed grades. Also the centre heads were required, in returning their recommended grades, to attest that there had been proper instruction given to teachers on how to avoid that. So fairly extensive measures were undertaken to avoid any bias and discrimination surfacing in the process.



As I say, the whole overall pictures were stable but there were some differences. I know it is very difficult to differentiate the extent to which those bear on the assessment construct that was used or they reflect more general disparities in learning. So far as your point about differential learning loss is concerned, obviously the principle behind the design of the arrangements was that they should be flexible and permissive so that they would accommodate differential learning loss in different centres. The idea is that teachers doing the assessment would have the best idea of what pupils had taught and been learnt because it did vary according to centre, according to the experience and according to what had happened with the pandemic, and so on. The arrangements were designed to provide some degree of compensation.

The stability of outcome suggest they were relatively successful. Of course it is a reasonably blunt instrument and you could not expect it to— it operated in aggregate fairly effectively but obviously it was not the perfect way of doing it, hence our enthusiasm to get back to exams, which deal with some of these issues in a more satisfactory way.

**Q65 Tom Hunt:** I want to ask some questions about young people with special educational needs. I would be grateful in your responses if you could cover both those who have EHC plans but also those who have not; dyslexic or dyspraxic, who might not have a plan but still have learning disabilities. From the data that I have seen it seems that since 2019 in relation to GCSEs, grade 7 and above, the attainment gap has risen by two points between those who have learning disabilities and those who do not. That is what I have seen. Since 2019 2% attainment gap increase between them and those who do not have learning disabilities, grade 7 and above GCSE. How does that increase compare with other years, say 2017 to 2019? Is that an alarming increase to you? Is that consistent with two-year periods before the one we have just seen?

**Nick Gibb:** For children with special educational needs, the teacher-assessed grade system does take into account those needs. In a normal exam year, a child with special needs can have adaptations to the exam; longer time, a scribe, and so on. Because we do not have exams this year and teachers are looking at the evidence of the work that the children have done in class, whether it is a mock exam or so on, if those arrangements have not been put in place for a mock—for example, because they took the mock thinking it does not matter so there is no point in having extra time or those arrangements—if that mock had not been conducted with those arrangements in place, the teachers have the flexibility to adjust their assessment of what the grade will be for that child in the full knowledge that there were no special arrangements put in place for that child when they did the mock.

The system is designed to be as flexible as possible to ensure fairness for children with special educational needs and disabilities, as it would be in a normal exam year.

**Q66 Tom Hunt:** We know that those with special educational needs are all



different. Often they process information in a different way. Often they are unconventional thinkers. Obviously we have seen big changes in assessment level over the last couple of years. What is your sense and are there any plans, probably from the Department or Ofqual, to do a report, do some serious research, reflecting on the different ways on which the last two years have had perhaps a unique impact on those with special educational needs within that sphere, different types of disability?

**Nick Gibb:** These two years—2020 and 2021—are not typical years and I hope we never go back to this approach to assessing young people. We do need to get back to a system that is fairer and more objective. Having said that, we will learn lessons from these two years, there is no question about that. We will look at all the processes that schools have been through. One thing we have learnt is that there is a huge workload implication for teacher assessed grades, and that is something that has concerned the school system.

But we do always reflect on how we can improve the assessment system for children and young people that do have special educational needs. We will continue to review that to make sure that the assessment system, the grading system, in a normal year is as fair as possible. I do not know whether Ofqual want to comment.

**Ian Bauckham:** Speaking as a teacher, many children with cognisant special educational needs struggle particularly with unpredictability and some of the unpredictabilities created by the pandemic have been particularly difficult for those children to manage. If we can get back to examinations that we can carefully prepare such children for, if the special considerations that those children benefit from in examination, particularly extra time, scribe support in the examination room, and so on, can be put back into place and children can have that calm practice at using those additional special considerations that they get, we are going to make a lot of progress. That is what those children need.

**Q67 Tom Hunt:** It is a very good point and often young people who have various needs do struggle with transitions between different things and it takes a certain amount of time to process. Often young people with learning disabilities do not mind having exams. They quite like exams because it gives time for them to consolidate their knowledge in their own way. I speak as a dyslexic and a dyspraxic, I had my own weird ways of consolidating my knowledge before exams and I often did better than my teachers were expecting.

I stress this point: when we are talking about young people with special educational needs, let us think about all of them because my slight concern sometimes is I hear a lot about EHC plans and those young people but let us not let the others fall through the net. That is those with dyslexia and dyspraxia who might not have those plans, they still may have been impacted quite uniquely in the different ways.

A final question—this is for Simon and Ian—it is to do with the



disadvantage gaps, it is building on this them and how it may have widened. There is a note from Ofqual that stated that it is impossible to disentangle the impact of the TAG-based awarding process and the impact of the pandemic of pandemic-induced disruption to education. Why is it impossible to disentangle? I understand how they are connected but I also can see how they are slightly different and how they may have impacted things differently. Why would you say it is impossible to disentangle those two different things?

**Ian Bauckham:** The only way we are going to know for certain what the underlying changes in trends and attainments have been during the course of the pandemic is when we have a national standardised test across the country because that will reveal those changes in performance.

Obviously this year and last year we have had a couple of different variables factored in. One of them is the disruption to learning caused by the pandemic, causing differential learning loss. The other variable is a completely novel way of assessing the entire GCSE and A-level cohort. Both of those variables have been imposed on the cohorts this year. There have clearly been changes in patterns of attainment and outcomes as a result, but maybe not of attainment. Which aspects of those changes were caused specifically by the change in grading approach and which were caused by disruption caused by the pandemic? It is, without some very targeted and large-scale research, going to be very difficult to be precise about. We are interested in that research, we are interested in doing it, we are a very research-focused organisation and will be commissioning further research in that area but it is impossible to say at the moment that the changes that we have seen are simply due to the pandemic or simply due to the approach we have taken in grading.

My final rider is that the large-scale research over a long period of time that we do have tells us that an approach for awarding qualifications based on examinations in the majority of cases benefits the least-advantaged contrary to many of the stereotypes that are abroad in that space.

**Simon Lebus:** There have also been extraneous variables that it is going to be hard to quantify—the impact of speed of switchover to online learning, access to technology, access to private space, study conditions and so on, where you can reasonably deduce they would have an impact. But you cannot model the precise nature of that impact or set it off against the permissiveness and flexibility of the arrangement. It is an intractable but important problem.

**Q68 Tom Hunt:** As a final question, and it picks up on what Ian said. Is your sense, reflecting over the last two years, therefore that those with special educational needs have sadly, as a result of what we have seen, much of it unavoidable, have fallen behind further as a result of the unique circumstances we have seen over the last two years?



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**Ian Bauckham:** As the Minister has said, there is no doubt that the pandemic will have had a particularly marked impact on the least advantaged. The extent to which that overlaps with pupils with additional educational needs is a factor to consider as well.

Q69 **Tom Hunt:** You think with regards to special educational needs a certain amount of that might be to do with this uncertainty and/or flux?

**Ian Bauckham:** I do not have research to back that up, that is my hunch as a teacher. That is likely to have been the case because I know children with SEND, particularly those with cognitive needs, benefit from stability and predictability on the whole.

**Simon Lebus:** Our equalities analysis summarises in relation to GCSE that results were broadly stable, and in relation to A-levels that gaps between SEND and non-SEND reversed. Non-SEND students now have slightly higher outcomes when controlling for prior attainments. So the picture of GCSE is stable, slight deterioration at A-level. I cannot give you more detail but I am sure colleagues can write—

**Tom Hunt:** So A-level there has been a slight—

**Simon Lebus:** A slight reversal but it was fairly slight from memory, but we can provide more information if that would be helpful.

**Tom Hunt:** So SEND pupils are falling a little bit further behind at A-level?

**Simon Lebus:** At A-level there was a reversal, so there was a slight deterioration at A-level, there was stability at GCSE but we can provide more detail.

Q70 **Kate Osborne:** My question is for Simon and Ian predominantly. The Education Datalab call for external research teams to be given access to the underlying data that Ofqual used in their assessment of results to test the sensitivity of the results to other modelling choices and give greater public confidence in the analysis. The 2020 data are available for researchers to allow wider scrutiny of your conclusions in relation to equalities and the disadvantage gap. It may well be that the conclusions are the same. But do you think that this approach could give greater public confidence in the analysis, the fact that it is being shared? Is it your intention to do the same for the 2021 results?

**Simon Lebus:** I hope it will give greater public confidence. There has been quite an issue getting this data made available because the project was ambitious inasmuch as we are seeking to link data from UCAS and from ourselves and from another entity, and then make it available in the Office of National Statistics database for external researchers.

My predecessor, Glenys Stacey, talked about this project in October and had indicated that the data would be available by January. Mr Mearns asked me about this when I appeared in February, and I indicated it would be available by May. Both my predecessor and I were wrong



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because it proved an incredibly complicated business negotiating the various legals of the data sharing between the entities involved.

However, that data are now available and in the public domain. It was published on 6 August for 2020, and it will certainly be made available with the data from this year. I apologise that it has taken such a long time to get this together. It has proved exceedingly complicated but it is now available.

**Q71 Ian Mearns:** Did you let people know that it was available on 6 August?

**Simon Lebus:** I have no idea what PR was used to support its launch. I am sure there would have been information available.

**Ian Mearns:** I am led to believe that people are not aware that it is available.

**Simon Lebus:** I apologise.

**Q72 Ian Mearns:** If it has been available since 6 August thanks for letting us know. I think it was 2 September last year that we were initially given a commitment that the source data would become available, so it is over 12 months ago. I understand there have been technical difficulties but it does seem to me that if we are going to learn lessons from analysing the source data many horses may already have bolted before those lessons can be learned. We do need to get that data available to people out there who are interested—Education Datalab, NFER, universities, and so on—just so people can analyse what is being done, how it is being done, why it is being done, and have confidence that what is being done is absolutely top class and in everybody's best interests.

**Simon Lebus:** I totally agree. I was troubled when you asked me about it in February, that it was taking so long. I took a personal interest in trying to pursue the matter. I would have hoped that my personal interest would have led to a more expeditious result than there was but unfortunately it took longer because of some of the complexities of sharing a lot of this data. So much is personal data between different bodies. There are some quite complex legal constraints. It was not out of any desire to deny access or make it more difficult for people to get, it was simply a question of getting the—

**Ian Mearns:** Given those lessons have now been learnt I would trust that the 2021 source data would become available much more quickly and in a timely fashion because you now know what the pitfalls are.

**Simon Lebus:** I would trust that too. The agreements now in place will make it a much smoother process. I am unfortunately only in office for another 10 days and I will not guarantee it will be before I go, but I am sure it will be much earlier this year.

**Ian Mearns:** Please pull out the crystal ball and tell us what date your successor might publish this data on.



**Simon Lebus:** I will get the crystal ball out after this meeting and we will write to you with some indications.

**Ian Mearns:** Very grateful, thank you very much.

**Kate Osborne:** I was just going to ask the crystal ball question in terms of when we can expect the 2021 data, so thank you.

Q73 **Chair:** Just before I come to Christian, you consider protective characteristics obviously when you are working out all these issues, can you just define “protected characteristics”? What groups are in so-called protected characteristics?

**Nick Gibb:** Do you want me to relay the Equality Act 2010?

**Chair:** Does it include those disadvantaged from low incomes—protected characteristics—or not?

**Simon Lebus:** The equality impact looks at the IDACI indices in terms of relative deprivation. It looks at free school meals, eligibility, gender and ethnicity. It looks at language and at SEND. Those are the main categories that we look at. That was all in the equalities impacts that we published on results day. There is a lot of information that we have been putting out and responding again to Mr Mearns’ and Ms Osborne’s questions about the data. We have been very aware. For me coming in, one of the key lessons from last year was the need to be transparent.

**Chair:** Is disadvantaged a protected characteristic?

**Simon Lebus:** “Disadvantaged” is defined in multiple different ways. It can be income, it can be region, it can be access to services and so forth.

Q74 **Christian Wakeford:** Obviously when it came to results day there was a wide amount of coverage given to A-levels and GCSEs, with unfortunately very little attention given to technical qualifications. What can Ofqual and the Department do, hopefully working together, to raise the profile of vocational and technical qualifications so that we get more children undertaking them?

**Nick Gibb:** We have a skills Minister, Gillian Keegan, who is passionate about raising the profile and the status of vocational qualifications. We have the skills Bill; we have had the White Paper. We have had all the reforms that stem from the Sainsbury review of vocational qualifications. We want there to be a clear pathway. It was always clear on the academic pathway what the route is; GCSE, A-levels, college, university. It is less clear with the thousands of different options available for the vocational group what those routes would be. The intention with T-levels and the improvement of the apprenticeship programmes is to make that a little clearer for young people. That is what we are seeking to do.

**Simon Lebus:** You are quite right, there is a difference in the degree of interest that it attracts on results day. The other thing is the reality that people get technical qualifications or there is not a results day in quite the same way because people are getting results at various different



points across the year. Also not all the people taking technical qualifications are school leavers, in a sense, so they are not necessarily all gathered in the same place. It is a rather different and more diverse population that is getting those results. As a general matter, I agree it is regrettable that it attracts rather less interest in the press.

**Q75 Christian Wakeford:** The Minister highlighted a lot of the projects we are working on in terms of the skills Bill, obviously we are one year on now from T-levels being introduced. Part of my concern, and we have mentioned it in this Committee many times before, is the career guidance being given by schools, which seems to be lacking in terms of directing people to apprenticeships. There does still seem to be a level of stigma around apprenticeships that if you are predominantly not as academically gifted, for example, which as we all know is clearly not the case.

In regards to that, what can we be doing to improve the career guidance in line with the Baker clause but also possibly try to find a different way into teaching because when we speak to teachers that are predominantly from A-level, university, PGCE, there has been no route into teaching via an apprenticeship? Obviously teachers' experience of apprenticeship is lacking because they have not gone through that route. Is perhaps a way to look at the route into teaching to overcome the stigma of apprenticeships as well?

**Nick Gibb:** We do look at all these issues as well. I do not know whether the Permanent Secretary wants to say anything about the apprenticeship approach that we are taking but we take these issues very seriously. You mentioned the Baker clause, and we do require schools to allow external organisations to make the case for apprenticeships, for other routes into high-skilled employment. We continue to look at what more we can do to make sure that young people are aware of all the options beyond the school's own sixth form, just to make sure there is fairness in the advice that young people are getting.

**Q76 David Johnston:** My question is to Susan. There is a feeling—certainly in the schools in Wantage and Didcot and I imagine in everybody's constituency—that students doing vocational and technical qualifications are an afterthought. That they were an afterthought throughout the pandemic, that we announce what we are going to do in GCSEs and A-levels and so on before we get to what is going to happen with BTECs, and so on. I wonder whether part of the problem is that very few of the Department staff have done these qualifications. I am asking the question, I do not know the answer, but how many people for example who helped to shape the policy in these areas have done those qualifications or have most of them, I am guessing, done a very traditional GCSE, A-level, university route and that is naturally what they gravitate to sorting first?

**Nick Gibb:** This sounds like a question for the Permanent Secretary but I would say this one thing before Susan comes in. They are not an afterthought. They are very much absolutely front and centre in our



thinking about what we do in a year when we cannot have exams. The difficulty is that the vocational and technical qualifications take varying types of assessment. They are not a consistent qualification like GCSEs and A-levels, which is very simple to understand. Here is an A-level, here is GCSE.

With vocational qualifications there are thousands of different qualifications. They have different assessment approach. Some are modular, some are assessed during the course, some are on-demand qualifications, some are online on-demand qualifications, some are competence-based qualifications that no matter what happens they have to take those exams because it would not be safe for them to go into an employment route without them having achieved that level of competence. That is the complexity.

What was front and centre is that whatever adaptations we make to the academic qualifications they have to be the same then for vocational qualifications that are used as a similar route into the same progression. If they have an exam in the vocational route then we have to make sure we apply the same principles to adaptation to those qualifications as we are applying to the academic qualifications. I will hand over now to Susan.

**Simon Lebus:** Sorry, I was just going to make a very practical point. Quite often we publish the results on consultations and decisions on VTQ before general qualifications. That is largely because we get fewer responses. At the consultation at the beginning of this year we had over 100,000 responses on the GQ consultation. We had in the region of 5,000 on the VTQ consultation. Similarly we published the arrangements for 2022 in June on terms of the vocational qualifications, and we are still expecting to do that shortly for general qualifications. So the volume of comment that has to be processed is that much smaller. Just from a practical matter, they are not an afterthought. They often come beforehand.

Q77 **David Johnston:** In terms of your staff, Susan, in the Department, and I accept what these guys are saying, but in terms of your staff do you have enough people with experience of doing these qualifications or teaching these qualifications to help shape the policy for them?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** The first thing I was going to say is I do not think it is an afterthought. As Simon has said, if you look at the history of where we have put out advice on vocational qualifications over the course of the year it would be right to say we have more often done it in advance of the GQ than behind the GQ.

I am proud that my Department is diverse and has a lot of staff who have different experiences and backgrounds and that includes lots of staff who have come to us or experienced apprenticeship, in particular, but I do have staff who, for example, have taught in FE, who have taught vocational qualifications and who have been through them.



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I do think there is a challenge, as the Minister describes, that the vocational and technical qualifications landscape is both more complicated and has changed more frequently than the general qualifications landscape so whether you have an individual who has experienced the exact regime that is currently in place, because we have seen a much more rapidly changing system it is highly likely that there are fewer people who have experienced the exact regime that is currently in place.

I think it is also important that my staff are professional, dedicated and passionate and they do their jobs to the best of their ability. As a good quality policy civil servant, you do not have to take your policy development from life. Indeed, it can be dangerous to take your policy development experience from your own life experience because it is a sample size of one.

**Q78 David Johnston:** Of course, but does anybody who helps to shape the policy in this area have the experience of these qualifications?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Certainly. There are plenty of people in the Department who have experience with these qualifications.

**Q79 David Johnston:** In the shaping of policy? I accept, I used to work with a lot of these Departments before, I know there are people in all sorts of roles and backgrounds, but often in the development of policy there is quite a narrow, and this is no criticism of it, A-level Russell Group graduates and I wonder if that might be a limitation at times on how policy is made.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I am also deputy head of the Policy Profession for the Civil Service and it is certainly true that in the Policy Profession we have tended to recruit people within academic backgrounds, because that fits the demands of the policy work that we ask them to do. It is one of the things we have pushed to shift over recent years, both in the composition of the fast stream as they come in, but also in looking at, for example, the development of policy apprenticeships. We have more and more people coming into the Policy Profession who are working through a policy apprenticeship or who take apprenticeship routes to develop their skills. I think that is important.

**Nick Gibb:** I would add one thing. The chief policy person in our skills side, the vocational qualifications side, Gillian Keegan, who is brilliant, is an apprentice graduate, and she has studied a BTech as well, so she is in charge of policy, and she has that experience.

**Q80 Chair:** I have proposed to Michael Gove that every new recruit to the Civil Service should be offered to an apprenticeship as well as to a degree person, unless there are specific circumstances. I think that would change the culture of Whitehall considerably.



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**Susan Acland-Hood:** We have already changed what is described as the EO entrance, which is the standard graduate entry grade to the Civil Service. That is now an entirely apprenticeship entry in our Department.

Q81 **Chair:** In the Department for Education?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** Yes.

**Chair:** That is very good. I shall be interested to see any details that you have on that.

Q82 **Ian Mearns:** Going back to a previous subject, the press release on 6 August I have had highlighted to me, and it says the DfE and the UCAS data is already available but thanks to this agreement the Ofqual data will soon be available to accredited researchers. So, has "soon" come to pass?

**Simon Lebus:** I could not tell you, but we will revert shortly after this meeting. I had understood it had come to pass and I would like to confirm that. I do not wish to mislead.

Q83 **Ian Mearns:** I think some clarification on that would be rather useful.

**Simon Lebus:** Certainly.

Q84 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you very much. What is your sense at this point as to how well the appeals system is working, and are all students able to appeal their results if they wish to do so?

**Simon Lebus:** All students are able to appeal their results if they wish to do so. It is always a curious question as to how well the appeal system is working. Does that mean you are getting lots of appeals, or does it mean the appeals are being processed efficaciously? The volume of appeals is rather in line with what it was last year, so it is much less than it would be in a normal year, and we prefigured throughout the year that we expected that to be the case. In the nature of the thing the appeals are against teacher judgment, they are not against grades. In a normal year what you get is people who are two or three marks below a grade boundary, so they appeal and it is a relatively mechanistic exercise. This is not like that.

Where people have put in priority appeals, the deadline for those to be returned is tomorrow. Where exam boards have been provided with the information they need from centres, those priority appeals will be determined in time. There have been one or two centres where that has not happened and one or two of the appeals are quite complex in their nature, because in challenging a teacher judgment you are unpicking a holistic judgment; it is not quite straightforward.

The deadline for all appeals to be received is 17 September, so that is still ongoing, but at the moment the volumes are relatively low. They have been processed in a timely fashion. There are one or two where the



centres have not been efficient in getting some of the information that exam boards will need to determine.

In terms of the access, which I think you are also asking about, we did go to great lengths ourselves to publish guidance for students, also the exam boards publish guidance for students, and this even went as far as templates that students could use to couch their appeal. There is lots of talk about getting lawyers involved, but I think that would not have been a good investment on anybody's part because the process for appeal was made very accessible, and ultimately lawyers are not in a very good position to unpick teachers' academic judgment, so I do not think they would be adding any value to a process that is well set out and well-defined, pretty accessible and which people have been using.

**Q85 Ian Mearns:** There are still quite a few parents and former pupils, in many cases, who are still disgruntled by what happened to them in 2020 and I am sure we might see a replication of that in 2021. Is Ofqual doing anything to address those ongoing and long-term concerns?

**Simon Lebus:** There are some aggrieved parents from 2020 and I still myself receive some correspondence and I know others receive some correspondence. There was a process for appeals that most of those have gone through and they clearly feel unsatisfied with the outcome, but there is no evidence that the appeals process itself was deficient. Where there has been a failure to follow procedure there is access for appellants to go to the Ofqual EPRS, which is the Exams Procedure Review Service. We had a certain number of cases which have gone through the normal processes. The EPRS will also be available to appellants this year, but it is a procedure review; it is not determining the academic substance of the case.

Even in a normal year where you have a much less complex process in relation to grades you do have appeals that go on and some of them can be quite complex to determine, but I think that as a broad principle the system has worked effectively this year. There has been access, they are being dealt with and I am confident that where the information has been provided the exam boards are in a good position.

**Q86 Ian Mearns:** We have been in a fairly strange situation, unprecedented almost, in terms of what has been happening out there. Given those extraordinary circumstances, do you think that you have enough resources that you can deal with these concerns in a timely way?

**Simon Lebus:** The exam boards geared up very significantly. We had a lot of discussions as exam boards, as regulator, as the Department, in terms of the programme board running up to the exams modelling the likely volumes of appeals. The provision that was made was calculated on a much greater level of appeals than in fact materialised.

**Ian Bauckham:** It may be worth reminding ourselves also that we have required exam boards to run an autumn series of examinations again this



year, as last year, which gives an opportunity for anybody who feels the TAG process has not served them well to undertake an examination.

Q87 **Ian Mearns:** Could you let us know how many appeals have been lodged so far from the 2021 cycle?

**Simon Lebus:** It is in thousands, but not tens of thousands. I cannot remember the precise figure, but it is very much in line with last year, which I think was around 5,000.

Q88 **Ian Mearns:** It would be interesting to know if there are particular profiles or particular areas where there is a prevalence within the number of appeals lodged. That would be useful to know.

**Simon Lebus:** Again this will be part of the data that we publish in December covering the totality of the quality assurance arrangements.

Q89 **Ian Mearns:** Are you confident that every student who wants to will be able to take an exam in the autumn term?

**Simon Lebus:** Every student who wants to will be able to take an exam in the subjects that have been made available. There are one or two subjects that are not being made available, but I think it will cover the bulk of the demand. It was a small session I think from last year, but it is there as a safety net.

**Nick Gibb:** In all subjects at GCSE and A-level and in maths and science at AS-level.

Q90 **Ian Mearns:** Are you confident that these will be a fair measure when compared to teacher assessments, which have been done previously?

**Simon Lebus:** Yes, they will. The awarding will be more difficult because the numbers are going to be small and it will be a rather specialist cohort, but we are aware of that. I think the autumn session last year worked effectively and we would expect it to be able to do so this year.

Q91 **Tom Hunt:** It is difficult to predict what is going to happen over the next year with Covid and the way it might disrupt education, but really with the vaccine I think we are pretty close to having a degree of certainty that there is not simply going to be the level of disruption of this academic year. There might be some, but I struggle to see how it could be anywhere near on the level that it has been over the last couple of years. When do you think you will be in that position to be able to publish what are the plans for assessment in this academic year? I guess it goes back to the importance of providing that certainty and predictability and how by doing that we can benefit some of the most disadvantaged pupils.

**Ian Bauckham:** There are two kinds of information that is still to be published. One is the decision following the consultation on adaptations, the qualifications, so that is things like advance notice, examination aids, and so on. The other piece of information is the approach that we are going to be taking to grading, so what grading approach we are going to



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follow. Both of those sets of decisions will be published very shortly this autumn.

Q92 **Tom Hunt:** Do you anticipate that this academic year will be largely back to normal?

**Ian Bauckham:** We very much hope so, as I think everybody does, but there is a need to have a contingency plan and we are working on that at the moment. Work is quite advanced on that, and we are planning a joint consultation with the Department for Education again later this autumn to propose a contingency plan, should the unthinkable happen and examinations again are disrupted.

Q93 **Tom Hunt:** Realistically that unthinkable would have to be a mutant variant that totally evades vaccination?

**Ian Bauckham:** A decision to cancel examinations would be a government decision, so we would then swing into action with the contingency plan should that happen, but we very much hope it will not, because we know examinations are the fairest way to assess students and deal with all the other issues we have been talking about this morning.

Q94 **Chair:** You are not going to cancel examinations?

**Nick Gibb:** We do not want to cancel exams. On the contingency, we do know that teachers and the school sector do want details of the contingency because they want to know what data they might or might not need to collect, should the worst happen, and we end up having to cancel exams. That is why it is important that we are publishing the consultation on contingencies very shortly, which we will be.

Q95 **Tom Hunt:** I guess in a sense it is right to have a contingency plan and I think that is the responsible thing to do, and I can understand why teachers would welcome that, but I think perhaps the messaging could be, "This is extremely unlikely. We are being responsible so there is a contingency plan but absolutely you should expect that there are going to be exams and it is going to be back to normal, so do not think that this contingency plan—"

**Nick Gibb:** My view has been throughout the pandemic that you have to plan for the worst. My experience so far in the pandemic is that that has generally happened. I genuinely hope from now on it will not be, but we still must plan for the worst.

Q96 **Tom Hunt:** I think when you look at the polling of general population when it comes to Covid a lot of them are pretty pessimistic about how things might go, I happen to think probably over-pessimistic, so I guess we do not want anyone to think in the back of their minds that there are probably not going to be exams.

**Nick Gibb:** No, they should assume that exams are going to go ahead, and the teaching should reflect the whole curriculum.



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**Chair:** If there is one thing we know about the Minister of State for School Standards, it is he wants exams to take place.

Q97 **Ian Mearns:** Rob, on that, I think only about a month before exams for 2021 were cancelled there did not appear to be any contingency plan in existence. Is the plan to have a plan or is there a plan in existence that is a contingency plan should there be anything untoward happen for 2022 exams?

**Nick Gibb:** We were planning even in the autumn of 2020 for the prospect of exams being cancelled. We did not want them to be cancelled; there was a lot of work happening in the autumn for what the adaptations would be for the 2021 exam season. While that work was going on we were also thinking and working with Ofqual, and Ofqual were doing the same about what would happen if the worst came to the worst and we had to cancel exams. That work had happened and that is why when the announcement was made by the Secretary of State on 6 January, we were able to publish a very detailed consultation document on 15 January, nine days later, setting out—

Q98 **Chair:** You are saying there is a contingency plan if, God forbid, the worst comes to the worst?

**Nick Gibb:** Yes, and we will be publishing that very shortly.

**Ian Mearns:** I am looking very closely at the Permanent Secretary nodding her head so I will take that on trust.

Q99 **Chair:** Have you been able to assess how many pupils in exam years have not been in school and how many learning days they have lost? The figure I have seen is that those in the GCSE years have lost one in four days of face-to-face teaching.

**Nick Gibb:** It has been very difficult. We kept schools open of course for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers. In fact across the developed world we have kept our schools open longer for more children. We also, if you recall in 2020, brought back the exam years for a quarter of the time when the schools were already closed for the rest of pupils, in order to address this issue.

Undoubtedly, we know that both this academic year and the last academic year exam years have suffered the same lockdown—

Q100 **Chair:** The reason I ask the question is once you know how many days have been lost and how much lost learning there has been then you can surely adjust the exam system accordingly?

**Nick Gibb:** Not in that finessed way. As my Ofqual colleagues will say the experience is different in different parts of the country. It is different in different regions and within regions. It is different within a school, because a certain child may be in a bubble that is sent home and different children may not be. It is hard to say that they have lost 44% of time, therefore reduce the curriculum by 44%. It is not as simple as that.



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The adaptations that we consulted on in July I think are the right approach to ensure fairness that you have more optionality in history, geography and English literature, which is what we consulted on. In those other subjects where optionality is not possible we are announcing advanced information, so that young people can then focus their revision from the spring on the areas of the curriculum that they know will come up in the exam. I think that is the best way of reflecting the differential experiences young people have had.

**Q101 Chair:** Can I pick up on something you said about the lost days? According to the House of Commons Library analysis of data from Oxford University between January 2020 and July 2021 British children were out of the classroom for nearly 44% of days, longer than anywhere in Europe except for Italy.

**Nick Gibb:** I am sure those figures are right, if they come from the House of Commons Library. I do not know whether the Permanent Secretary has any more detail of those numbers, but we know there has been disruption. That is not a fact that is in dispute. In 2021 our objective was to make sure young people could move on to the next phase of their careers and their education, notwithstanding the fact that we have cancelled exams. I think that has been successful, in achieving that aim. In 2022 we need to get back to exams; they are the fairest approach but we need to reflect in the way those exams are being conducted the fact that they have lost—

**Q102 Chair:** To go back you need to assess the lost days, particularly those in exam years, and then how much catch-up is needed, and what catch-up, and then you can work out what kind of exams take place next year, which I am in favour of, by the way.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I think there are two things that we need to do. We need to make sure that we are looking at lost learning, and that we are thinking carefully about making sure we understand what has happened during the course of the past year. Although I think the figures that you quote are technically correct in looking at the days on which children were not in school, all schools were closed to most children, the first thing is they do not necessarily take into account the children who were in school, because we had the policy around the disadvantaged and vulnerable. Secondly, they make no distinction between a day on which good quality remote learning was being provided to children and a day on which it was not.

What we have seen through Renaissance Learning and other lost learning research is that for example the impact of the second lockdown was significantly different from the impact of the first lockdown, because of the quality of the remote learning that was being provided. I am not saying it was perfect; it certainly was not and I am not saying it is as good as a face-to-face experience, but it is a bit more nuanced than counting the number of days during which a school was not fully open. That is why we prefer to focus on the evidence of lost learning.



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The second thing is that the thing that comes to mind—

Q103 **Chair:** You say you have not assessed the amount of lost learning in exam years?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** We have used as many instruments as we have available to us, including the reference test that we described to look at lost learning across as many cohorts as possible. The Renaissance Learning and the typical reference instruments used in schools that were able to do that at larger scale were more concentrated in primary and lower secondary years, but we are looking at as much as we can.

The one thing that comes through absolutely every assessment of lost learning is this point that the Minister makes, about the picture being very differentiated. We need to think carefully about the adaptations that help with differential loss of learning, rather than applying an average slide-rule based on the number of days lost.

Q104 **Chair:** Finally, when the exams take place next year ideally in order to row back on the grade inflation will you peg the results to 2019 or halfway between 2019 and 2020?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** That is the grading decision that is going to be announced.

**Nick Gibb:** You will know the answer to that question in October when—

Q105 **Chair:** Can you give us a direction of travel?

**Nick Gibb:** No. You will have to wait until October.

Q106 **Chair:** Why not?

**Nick Gibb:** These are very technical and difficult decisions and in October we will have the answer.

Q107 **Chair:** Is it your intention to dampen down grade inflation for next year's exam system?

**Nick Gibb:** Standards are hugely important, but so is fairness. Our instruction or our request to Ofqual was to—

Q108 **Chair:** If you could answer the question. Is it your intention as someone who cares deeply about these issues and has done so much to try to inform our education system to dampen down grade inflation in next year's exam system?

**Nick Gibb:** You will get the answer to that in October. What I will say is—

Q109 **Chair:** I am not asking you to give me the specifics. I am asking you, is it your intention to downgrade inflation next year? I do not see it as an unreasonable question to ask.



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**Nick Gibb:** You will get the answer in October. What I will say is that we asked Ofqual to ensure that we had fairness in 2022 compared to previous cohorts.

Q110 **Chair:** Why can you not just say whether you want to dampen down grade inflation? You would have had no problems saying that in the past. It has been your mission for 10 years plus. Why can you not just say to me whether you want to dampen down grade inflation? It is not an unreasonable question.

**Nick Gibb:** What you are asking me is to anticipate what is going to be in the October announcement by Ofqual and I do not want to do that.

Q111 **Chair:** No, I am just asking you is it your anticipation to dampen down grade inflation in the long-term, then? Can you answer that?

**Nick Gibb:** Of course. We do not want an exam system that has inbuilt inflation. That is what we saw before 2010 and it was not what we want to see in our exam system.

Q112 **Chair:** The old Nick Gibb would have said, "We want to dampen down grade inflation", that you want exams to maintain their currency and value without hesitation, but now you do not want to tell us.

**Nick Gibb:** Ofqual is about to publish, in October, what they are going to do about grading in 2022. It is a very technical and important question that schools are waiting for the answer for.

Q113 **Chair:** There is nothing wrong to say that your preference is that we have lower grade inflation.

**Nick Gibb:** I can tell you what is uppermost in my mind, and that is fairness. We are going through a very challenging period.

Q114 **Chair:** What does that mean? That is a mother and apple pie word. Of course everybody wants fairness. I also believe in mother and apple pie.

**Nick Gibb:** I want the 2022 cohort to be treated as fairly compared with subsequent cohorts and past cohorts 2020 and 2021. That is something that Ofqual is reflecting on as they decide on what the grading system is going to look like in 2022.

Q115 **Dr Johnson:** I want to ask a question about home-educated students. In 2020 home education students faced a particular disadvantage because many of them did not have any independent assessments of their ongoing progress. From our Committee inquiry, I know there are limitations to data on children from outside the formal education system, but what information do you have regarding home-educated students, their attainment in exams this year and what thoughts do you have for ensuring that their assessments are fair next year?

**Nick Gibb:** This was something that was uppermost in our minds when we were devising the system for 2021, how we make sure that every system we have as an alternative to exams also enables private



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candidates to be awarded their qualifications. In fact, there were more entries for private candidates in 2021 than there were in 2020. We have worked with private exam centres to make sure that they were able to facilitate private candidates from being awarded grades.

The problem with private candidates that we have to address is if they do not have a connection with a school how can a teacher provide the evidence to support the grade? We knew that for an exam centre, particularly a private exam centre that would have been the centre where they sat the exam, to provide that private candidate with a grade would be quite an extensive operation for them, so we provided a subsidy of £200 per candidate per subject for private candidates so that they would not face fees beyond what they would normally pay for their exam. I think that has been a successful approach, to make sure that those private candidates could achieve a grade, and that is why we are seeing a higher entry rate for private candidates this year compared to last year. I do not know whether Ofqual want to add anything to that.

**Q116 Dr Johnson:** Are you happy that those results are as robust as they are in the formal sector?

**Nick Gibb:** I do not know whether you want to comment on results for private candidates further.

**Simon Lebus:** Yes, there is no reason to assume they are not robust. There were requirements of centres that had private candidates attached to them to look at their work and satisfy themselves that it was representative of what private candidates could do. As far as I am aware that has worked, but I have not had a lot of feedback from private candidates that that has been unsatisfactory. There have been some comments on the costs associated with that and the DfE provided a subvention to private candidates to support them attaching themselves to centres, and as discussed there is the autumn series available for any private candidates who felt the arrangements were not sufficiently supportive or they felt they were unable to access them equitably.

**Q117 Chair:** Will the Government be announcing a register for home education soon? The Secretary of State indicated that this will be happening when he spoke to us before the summer.

**Nick Gibb:** We are committed to a register of children not in school and we will be responding to that consultation as soon as possible.

**Chair:** That is a wonderful Whitehall answer. Thank you.

**Q118 Ian Mearns:** Changing the subject somewhat, the Department launched a consultation on Initial Teacher Training market review on 5 July, which concluded on 22 August. Do you think that was good timing, to launch such a consultation process given the subject matter and who the consultees were likely to be? In other words, wait until the end of term and then conclude the consultation halfway through the summer break.



**Nick Gibb:** That is not the only consultation we are doing. We are talking to the university sector; we are talking to ITT providers, so there is a lot of informal conversation happening about the ITT market review. We know there are a lot of examples of good practice in the Initial Teacher Training sector, and the review intends to build on that very good practice. The evidence also suggests that there are still variations in that and that there is more we can do to improve quality and consistency. That is the aim of the ITT market review.

Q119 **Ian Mearns:** The formal consultation process was launched by the Department on 5 July and all I am suggesting is possibly the timing might have been thought about a little more constructively, Minister.

**Nick Gibb:** That is still a couple of weeks before the end of term. As I said it is not the only consultation we are doing. There is a lot of formal and informal conversations happening with the sector.

Q120 **Ian Mearns:** It is not like the educational establishment out there was going through a quiet period at that time, in terms of formulating responses. I am sorry, Minister. I think it is quite unforgiveable that a consultation process with the educational sector would have been launched and concluded in such a timely manner.

**Nick Gibb:** The quality of teacher training is hugely important in terms of the catch-up programme. We want to conduct this market review swiftly; we want the conclusions from it to be implemented swiftly, because it will have a direct impact on the quality of teaching. That is why part of the catch-up package, of the £3 billion £400 million is being spent on CPD for teachers, because we know that the quality of teaching that happens in the classroom has a direct impact on, first, catch-up and secondly the success of disadvantaged children in closing that gap.

Q121 **Ian Mearns:** I am not talking about a scientific survey, but I did ask around lots of people towards the end of last term in July. The vast majority of them were totally unaware that this consultation was going on, and that included chief executives of academy trusts, head teachers and so on. I think it seems deeply unfortunate that a policy response to a consultation is going to be based on a consultation that, frankly, could have been concluded at a better time.

**Nick Gibb:** The issue is if we had delayed the closing of that consultation into the autumn term it would have delayed the implementation of the conclusions of the review by a full year. That is what we did not want to do.

Q122 **Chair:** Is the special needs review going to be published soon?

**Nick Gibb:** That will also be published in due course, yes.

Q123 **Chair:** Originally it was going to be before the summer, so do we expect it by the end of the year? Are you able to say that at least?



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**Nick Gibb:** I do not know whether the Permanent Secretary wants to come in. It is important to get the special needs review right and there is a lot of work happening. This is a very important review. It goes to the heart of the quality of the education experience some of the most vulnerable children have.

Q124 **Chair:** Do you think we will get it out by the end of the year, Permanent Secretary, with any luck?

**Susan Acland-Hood:** We will get it out as soon as we have it ready to the quality that we want.

Q125 **Chair:** Originally it was going to be before the summer as well.

**Susan Acland-Hood:** I absolutely appreciate that.

**Nick Gibb:** We are in the middle of a pandemic.

Q126 **Chair:** I get it. I am just asking. Is there a possibility we will see it before the end of the year?

**Nick Gibb:** We will publish it when it is ready. Some of these reviews have been subject to the demands on Civil Service time in the Department as we are dealing with a pandemic.

**Chair:** I am not criticising. I am asking about the timing because we had our own Select Committee report on special education needs some time ago, in December 2017 I think, and so clearly it is a huge issue to many parents.

Q127 **Tom Hunt:** Very quickly, will that review look at funding of SEND and trying to alleviate any bizarre disparities there are in funding per head for people in different counties, for example in Suffolk, particularly unfairly funded when it comes to special needs? It would be fantastic if that review could iron out those quite glaring inconsistencies between funding in different areas.

**Nick Gibb:** It is looking at all of those issues. It is looking at primarily the quality of what children with special needs experience, but also it is addressing the issue of cost. You know that local authorities have been subject to a very high increase in costs. That is why we have increased the high needs budget for the last three years. If you look at the three-year increases—about £700 million a year increases—that is about 33% increase just in three years in terms of the high needs budget that go into local authorities. We do know that most local authorities have suffered a deficit on their high needs budgets, but some have suffered very severe deficits. It is addressing that, and there are reasons for that. It is to do with medical advance in science, it is to do with the use of independent special schools that local authorities are using and so on. These are all the issues that the SEND review is looking into.

**Chair:** The good news is that is it. Can I thank you, Simon, for your service? I know you have only a few days left and whatever system that



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you would have developed would have had flaws and I recognise that your organisation has been under considerable pressure to produce a system, given what happened with exams, and I thank you for taking up the mantle of public service, because it is not a job that I suspect thousands of people would volunteer to have done. It is a huge credit to you and I wish you well for the future. Thank you to the Permanent Secretary and to you, Ian, and thank you again, Nick, for appearing before our Committee.