



1 July 2022

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP, Chair
Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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Dear Chair – Mr Halfon,

I am writing to you following a significant milestone in the delivery of qualifications, as students have now taken their summer exams for the first time in 3 years. This milestone has been reached thanks to the hard work of teachers, support staff, school and college leaders and awarding organisations.

I know that the Committee welcomes the return of exams and other formal assessments – as do I as Chief Regulator. As I've spoken to students and their teachers in schools and colleges up and down the country, I have been delighted to hear that they too have welcomed the opportunity to take their exams. I do not underestimate what this year's students have been through at the hands of the pandemic and that is why we have enabled an unprecedented [package of support](#) for students taking GCSEs, AS and A levels this year. Awarding organisations have also put in place a range of adaptations for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs). These have been made in assessments taking place throughout the year to mitigate the impact of disruption caused by the pandemic and to allow occupational skills to be assessed.

Reflections on the summer series

It is important to remember the scale of the summer exam series, with over a million students sitting GCSEs, AS and A levels and exam boards marking more than 16 million scripts and awarding 5.7 million grades. We expect around 5 million VTQ certificates to be awarded this year. Such large-scale delivery presents challenges and Ofqual requires awarding organisations to have suitable controls to manage potential delivery risks.

In any year, despite the safeguards in place, things can go wrong. This year particularly, in the wake of the pandemic, we have worked with awarding organisations and the sector to understand and mitigate additional risks to the safe delivery of the exam series and many other assessments.

In response to concerns about anticipated high levels of student absence from exams due to Covid, we asked the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) to consider the spacing of the exam timetable for GCSEs, AS and A levels. JCQ changed the timetable to increase the time between different papers in a subject to minimise the risk of a student missing all their exams. We have been observing exam absence, and the available data indicates attendance rates comparable to 2019. At this time, we are not aware of any significant gaps in attendance during the exam period. We also asked VTQ awarding organisations to consider adjusting their own timetables as necessary, and some did so to avoid disadvantaging students who took VTQ assessments alongside GCSE, AS or A level exams.

Ofqual monitored awarding organisations' recruitment of markers this year, because of the risk that two years without exams together with the logistical implications of timetable changes could affect recruitment. Awarding organisations have largely recruited their target number of markers, although we continue to meet regularly with them to discuss marker retention and marking and moderation progress.

Ofqual closely monitors awarding organisations during the series, and through marking and awarding. We have rules to safeguard the delivery of exams and formal assessments and if awarding organisations do not comply with those, we can – and do – take action as the regulator.

For the first time this year exam boards have provided advance information for students ahead of some exams. Of the 354 specifications for which advance information was provided, only a handful of errors have emerged. Our first priority is to regulate on behalf of students, and accordingly we expect the awarding organisations to make sure students' interests are protected and the integrity of the qualification is upheld. We will closely monitor the awarding process to make sure that students are not disadvantaged compared to those taking the same qualification with another exam board. Regulatory action is, of course, also in scope and is something we will consider once the immediate interests of students are protected.

As in previous years, there have been security breaches of confidential assessment material. The majority have been very limited, such as students being given the wrong exam paper on the day of the exam. Ofqual and the awarding organisations take security breaches extremely seriously. Awarding organisations are investigating, working collaboratively and with appropriate authorities. On the rare occasions breaches occur, penalties can be serious and students who cheat risk being disqualified from their qualifications.

As in other years, we have seen hoaxers trying to sell fake exam papers on social media. Ofqual has advised students not to be distracted by such hoaxes and has reminded them that students trying to sell or buy fakes could be disqualified from their qualifications.

Marking and moderation is now underway in earnest, and Ofqual will be checking awarding organisations' progress so that results are released on time. This year brings two welcome new developments for GCSEs, AS, A levels and T levels that we decided to introduce before the pandemic. It is the first summer that awarding organisations have been required to provide students with access to their exam scripts to inform their decision about whether to request a review of marking. It is also the first summer that exam boards have been required to automatically provide students with reasons for the review of marking decisions taken.

Looking ahead to results

As those millions of scripts and pieces of work are being marked or moderated, attention will turn to expectations for results this year. As you know, Ofqual announced in September last year that we want to return to pre-pandemic grading, not least because this is best understood by the many users of qualifications. I do not think it would be fair to students to return to those pre-pandemic standards in one step – so this year's results will reflect a staging post between 2019 and 2021. Ofqual is asking the exam boards to set grade boundaries to reflect the pandemic context; to avoid disadvantaging some students who might otherwise just miss out on a higher grade.

I am clear that in coming to this decision Ofqual has acted in the best interests of students. The approach to grading is the right thing to do for this year's cohort of students. This means that overall, 2022 results are likely to be higher than in 2019 when summer grades were last determined by exams, but lower than was seen in 2021.

For VTQs that are used for similar purposes such as progression, Ofqual has asked awarding organisations to take account of the grading approach for GCSEs and A levels when setting standards in their own qualifications. This includes this summer's first ever awards for T Levels.

My team and I will continue to work with the sector to improve understanding of grading. It's important to me that students and their teachers understand what's happening this year – but also that those who use the grades achieved by students, for example colleges, higher education and employers, understand what the arrangements mean this year.

Arrangements for 2023

We have confirmed that adjustments made to non-exam assessment, fieldwork and practical science in 2022 are no longer needed given that public health measures have now been removed. At the same time, the Department for Education confirmed the return to full subject content coverage for GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography.

Our intention is to return to the carefully designed and well-established pre-pandemic assessment arrangements as quickly as possible, given they are the best and fairest way of assessing what students know and can do. We will continue to monitor the path and impact of the pandemic and evaluate the delivery of arrangements this year, including the provision of exam aids, such as formulae sheets, and advance information to support students' revision, before finalising 2023 arrangements. Given that we both have responsibilities in this area, Ofqual for assessment arrangements and the Department for Education for curriculum, I am committed to working with the Department for Education to confirm as early as possible in the autumn term whether there will be any other adaptations in 2023. This is because we need to deliver results safely this summer, and of course assess the impact of advance information and exam aids provided to students this year.

As you know, I have already set out the overarching plan for grading, pending a review of both 2022 awarding and an assessment of the path of the pandemic by the start of the Autumn.

For other qualifications, including VTQs taught alongside or instead of GCSEs, AS and A levels, some adaptations to assessments were made where appropriate in the

academic year 2021 to 2022, as permitted by Ofqual's rules. Some adaptations were in response to public health restrictions. Given that public health restrictions are no longer in place, these adaptations are no longer necessary for the academic year 2022 to 2023 onwards. Ofqual is working closely with the Department for Education as they develop policy positions relating to the academic year 2022/23. Government policy will inform Ofqual's decisions about the regulatory arrangements for those qualifications.

I would be happy to provide more information about any of the areas above. I look forward to updating you and the Committee further on our work in due course.

Yours sincerely,



JO SAXTON, PhD
CHIEF REGULATOR