

16 March 2020

## Summer 2020 GCSE and A/AS level exam series

### Contingency planning for Covid-19 – options and risks

As part of our contingency planning for summer 2020 we held two workshops and frequent meetings with exam boards to consider options in relation to the exam timetable in the event of widespread disruption as a result of Covid-19.

While our primary focus in this work has been England, we have been working closely with regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland, as there are interdependencies between the exam systems in the three jurisdictions.

In this work we have focused on the safe delivery of valid results to students. A decision to do anything other than to run a normal exam series with the full cohort of students brings challenges and risk to these objectives to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless, we are confident that we would be able to reach consensus with exam boards and, where necessary, change our rules to accommodate the approach taken. We recognise, though, that moving away from a normal exam series has far-reaching consequences in relation to student mental health, student progression, funding, etc and for this reason we recognise that the decision here is one for Ministers.

### **Note that exam boards are still working to business as usual with the timetable and all other arrangements as originally published.**

This business as usual planning includes managing their own business continuity as well as established contingency plans for cases where individual students miss exams due to illness.

In the event that there is widespread disruption due to the exceptional circumstances relating to Covid-19, we discussed additional contingency plans. We discussed many possible scenarios but in relation to the timetabled exams we have focused on three main options (although with some variants within each).

- A. **Additional papers:** operate the exam timetable as published **and** offer additional papers in a small number of subjects for students who miss all exams (and non-exam assessment where available) in that subject. This is likely to mean results are released later than the published dates but the extent of a delay will depend on the number of students taking the additional papers. The aim would be to have an assessment result for as many students as possible while sticking to the established timetabled window.
- B. **Delay:** postpone the start of the exam timetable as far as possible within the existing school term dates (with or without the additional papers in option A). Looking at term dates for maintained schools, it appears that a delay to the start of the exam timetable of up to three weeks might be possible (for details, see Annex 1) although this would mean results could not be issued until after the start of the autumn term. The aim would be to have assessment results for as many students as possible recognising that the peak of the virus may coincide with the established timetabled window.

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

- C. **Estimate grades:** issue grades based on teacher estimates which have been statistically moderated at centre / cohort level to bring them, as far as possible, into line with previous years' results. The aim would be to ensure students have recognition of the learning they have undertaken and evidence to support progression.

We also shared these plans, in confidence, with a trusted headteacher and with the General Secretary of ASCL to assess their feasibility. Given the dynamic nature of the situation and the potential for plans to be scuppered by unfolding events, Annex 4 contains some further options, although we have not yet considered in detail the feasibility of those. These options include the possibility of a longer delay to exams (to the autumn) and a standardised school/college leaving certificate should the situation be such that it is not possible to run exam series for a large proportion of the cohorts affected.

We have considered the feasibility and risks of each of options A to C, in the context of the following objectives:

- To operate in line with current medical and scientific advice
- To ensure that students receive fair results that enable judgements to be made about progression to further or higher education, employment or other avenues. Ideally, this would mean making sure that every student has at least one exam mark for each subject they are taking. Exam boards already have mechanisms to calculate an overall grade in such circumstances.<sup>1</sup> However, there are significant risks to setting standards on these papers and issuing overall grades if large numbers of students have missed some of their exams.
- To mitigate the potential impact of students who are isolated/unwell for up to 2 weeks, thus missing all their exams in a subject and therefore having no evidence on which a grade could be based. We recognise that some students might be isolated/ill for longer periods but many aspects of the contingency plans become untenable if we base planning on what is currently predicted to be smaller numbers of cases.
- To limit the impact, as far as possible, to the 2019/2020 academic year, to avoid teaching and learning in the autumn term being delayed or disrupted by the need to move exams into the autumn term. To delay into the next school year would have far wider consequences and impact subsequent cohorts of students, disrupt universities and mean that schools do not have capacity for teaching and examinations.
- To balance the already increased delivery risks if a percentage of school exams officers, invigilators, scribes, readers, exam board staff and/or examiners are unwell, with the additional risks of any alternative arrangements
- To minimise logistical impacts on schools and colleges

---

<sup>1</sup> Just over 21,000 GCSE/AS/A level qualifications were awarded on this basis in 2019 – see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-consideration-in-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2019-exam-series>

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

- To minimise uncertainty for students, parents, teachers and heads and therefore reduce the potential for widespread anxiety (with consequent risks to student welfare), rumour and confusion
- To mitigate, as far as possible, the risks that standards are not maintained in summer 2020, in order to maintain public confidence in reformed GCSEs and A levels

We have prioritised contingency arrangements as follows. The rationale for the prioritisation is set out in Annex 2.

Priority 1 – A levels, GCSE English language and GCSE maths

Priority 2 – GCSE separate sciences/combined science

Priority 3 – Other GCSEs (with a focus on high-entry/EBacc subjects)

Priority 4 – Level 3 Applied General/Tech levels

Priority 5 – Level 2 national VTQs, AS

### Current proposal

Exam boards are currently preparing to deliver option A (additional papers). For the reasons set out in annex 2 (timeline) a decision to move to option B (postpone the start of the timetable) would be needed by **23 March** in order to manage arrangements for communications, despatch of papers, and examiner availability and training.

Regardless of that decision, we will also need to put in place arrangements so that, if necessary, we can move to option C in response to medical and scientific advice.

It is worth noting that the exam board staff who are responsible for delivering the summer exam series are also those involved in contingency planning. The more contingency plans being prepared, the greater the risk to safe and effective delivery of the exam series. Preparing for option B alongside option A increases the risks of delivering option A.

**Our preference is to continue with business as usual, with the exam timetable operating as published but with additional papers prepared as a contingency in a small number of subjects** – for the following reasons.

- It is the most likely to succeed and meet our objectives set out above.
- It provides, as far as possible, the opportunity for every student to have a mark in every subject (from which a grade could be extrapolated), whereas with option B some students may still miss all exams in a subject, if the infection peak is later than currently forecast.
- From the limited discussions we have had with school/college leaders, it is seen as the least worst option and least likely to increase anxiety for students
- It makes the best use of school/college staff (particularly exam officers, invigilators, readers and scribes) and exam board resource by allowing them to continue (as far as possible) with their current schedule and make plans for additional papers in a small number of subjects.

## **OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

- It will not require schools to remain open beyond the published end of term dates (although recognising that these do vary, with the earliest being 14 July)
- It minimises uncertainty for students and parents, and reduces widespread anxiety and the consequent risks to student welfare
- It minimises the likelihood of security breaches – papers being opened on the wrong day and given to students, who can then share the contents. If exams are moved then the date printed on the paper will not be the date on which it is to be sat, thus increasing the risk that the wrong papers are opened.
- It reduces the risks around modified versions of papers (which take longer to prepare) for students with visual or hearing impairments, and therefore minimises the risk of widening the so-called ‘disadvantage gap’

Option A assumes that students would take their exams in their own school/college, even if these were closed.

### **Implications for other qualifications taken in schools and colleges**

There are a number of other qualifications taken by students in schools and colleges at the same time as GCSEs and A levels, or earlier, including vocational and technical qualifications that count for performance tables, international GCSEs, Pre-U and IB. We have not considered these in detail but any decision about the GCSE/A level timetable could have implications for these.

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

### Annex 1: Timeline for decisions

We have discussed with exam boards the decision points for the various options. These are as follows, along with other key dates to be aware of.

**Monday 23 March** – last date for decision to delay (option B) without increasing the risk of papers being leaked because they are in schools for a much longer period before being sat. First despatches of confidential question papers started on Friday 13 March (for MFL oral exams), but in some cases this has been delayed until 23 March. Further delays are not possible due to capacity within third party printers.

**Wednesday 25 March** – ideal last date for communicating to centres the information that will be required in case option C (grades based on teacher estimates) is required. Schools will need time to prepare the information, and the data collection will be untested for school and exam board systems, thus making it high risk.

**Friday 27 March** – some schools (mainly independent schools) break for Easter

**Friday 3 April** – most maintained schools break for Easter

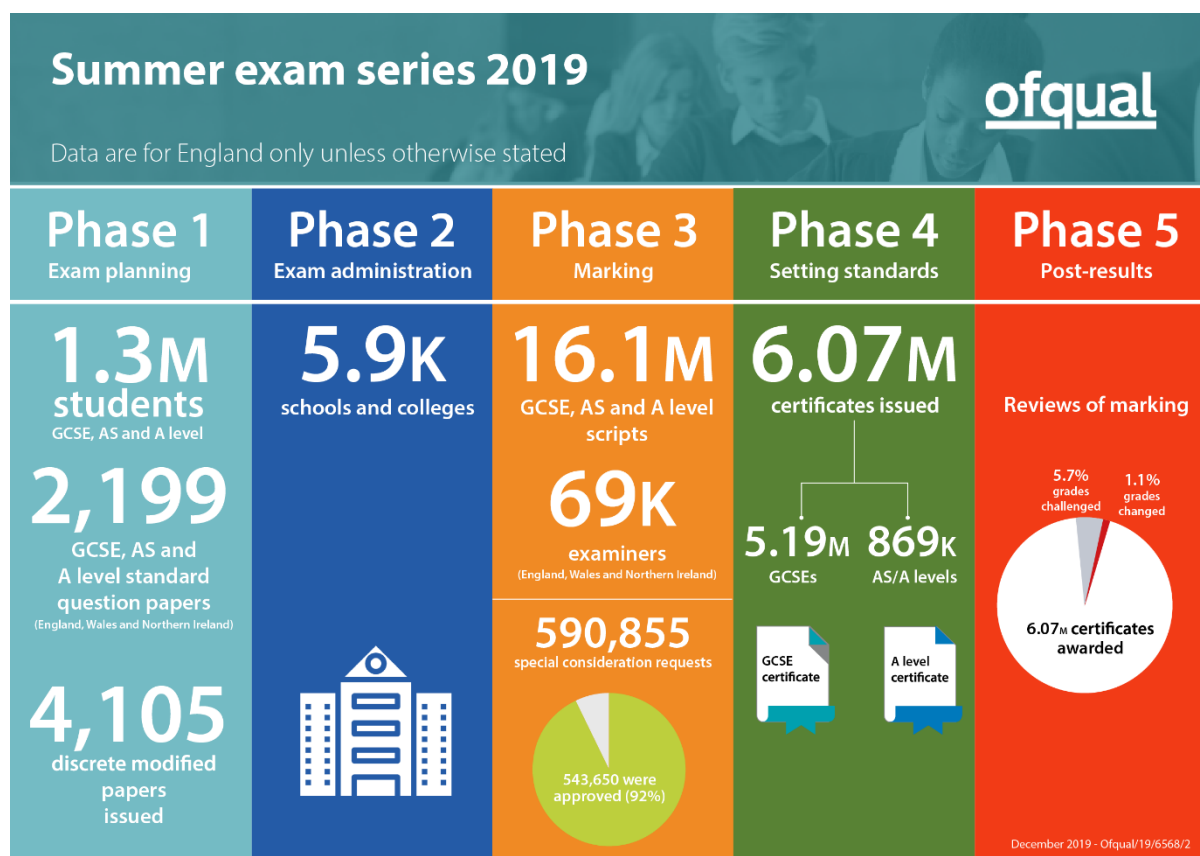
**Monday 20 April** – start of summer term for most maintained schools

**Friday 8 May** – VE day bank holiday

**Monday 11 May** – published start date for GCSE/A level timetable

**Wednesday 24 June** – contingency day at the end of the published timetable

The summer exam series is complex and high-volume (see below) with 1.3 million students taking over 2000 different question papers.



Exam boards have already started detailed planning work for implementing option A, because of the lead-in times. This requires putting in place arrangements for what is, in effect, an additional (albeit on a smaller scale) summer series. This includes, for those subjects where additional papers will be provided, finalising quality checks, printing standard papers and a range of modified papers for those with visual and hearing impairments, arranging despatch and script collection, making sure examiners contracted on original schedules are also available for the later schedule, training of examiners, marking, setting grade boundaries and checking/issuing results. Additionally, there will need to be systems put in place so that students who could not sit the original papers are transferred to the additional papers.

Each of the 2000 or so papers in a typical summer series has its own timeline/processing schedule which is already set. Standardisation of examiners – training them to mark according to the mark scheme – typically starts within days of the exam being sat and continues over a 2 to 4 week period, depending on the date of the exam.

Making additional papers available later in the timetable (option A) will mean a delay to the issue of results. At this stage, it is difficult to estimate the likely delay, because it will depend on the number of students who sit those later papers. High-volume subjects such as GCSE English language, English literature and maths are scheduled early in the timetable in order to allow enough time for marking. If substantial numbers of students take the later additional papers instead, then marking will take longer, and results will be released later. This is likely to have a greater impact on GCSE results than on A level, because of the volumes.

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Delaying the timetable (option B), even by only 1 or 2 weeks, will also have substantial knock-on effects. Processing schedules cannot automatically be moved by the same number of weeks because they will be dependent on examiner availability, in particular the availability of principal examiners (responsible for the marking of a whole paper). Examiners are likely to have booked holiday and if we are past any peak of infection such that there are no travel restrictions, it's likely that these examiners will not be available to mark. It is also possible that, given the age profile of examiners, they are more likely to need to avoid risk of exposure to the virus by avoiding face-to-face training meetings. The consequent delays to the issue of results is difficult to predict without extensive consultation with those examiners. Any delay to the start of the timetable would mean, at the very least, a similar delay to results being issued (and could be longer, depending on the volume of students taking the additional papers). This would be problematic for HE entry. UCAS have told us that 31 August is the latest date that HE admissions systems could accommodate.

Having spoken to the exam boards, we believe a decision to delay the timetable (and confirmation of by how long) would need to be made by **23 March**, to avoid unnecessary risks to the safe delivery of the series. Once delayed, this would be very difficult to change again, without further risk, because of the difficulty of making sure that any communications are received by every one of the 6000 schools, colleges and other providers. Even in a normal summer series, it can be very difficult to get a message to all schools in the event that a question paper has to be replaced at short notice.

Delaying the timetable (option B) but keeping within term time for maintained schools would mean a delay of no more than 3 weeks to the start of the timetable. Maintained schools in England will start to break up in mid July. For example, the last day of the summer term in Leicestershire (typically earlier than other local authorities) is Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> July (although Monday 13<sup>th</sup> and Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> are designated as INSET days). However, it is likely that independent schools will close earlier.

Northern Ireland schools will close on 28 June. Approximately 2% of GCSE and 13% of A level qualifications taken in Northern Ireland are offered by exam boards from England and Wales. Any decision to move the timetable for England would therefore also need to apply to Northern Ireland, which would mean keeping schools open beyond the normal end of term date. If a decision is taken to delay, then it is likely that a Ministerial decision would be needed to re-open schools to enable those students to sit at the same time as England students.

**Annex 2: Prioritisation of qualifications/subjects for contingency arrangements**

While exam boards are still planning for business as usual, we agreed the following prioritisation of qualifications and subjects, to guide considerations about which qualifications/subjects would have additional contingency papers, and, if necessary, to allow exam boards to prioritise marking, awarding and the timely issue of results.

Priority	Qualifications/subjects	Rationale
1	All A levels GCSE English language GCSE maths	A levels are used primarily for HE entry. All subjects are therefore equally important for those students using them to progress to HE. A small number of subjects include non-exam assessment, which might form the basis of estimating grades if student miss their exams. GCSE English language and GCSE maths are 'gateway' qualifications required for progression to further education and employment. Neither contain any non-exam assessment.
2	GCSE biology, chemistry, physics GCSE combined science	For students wishing to pursue further study and a career in science, GCSE grades are critical for decisions to be made about entry to courses/employment. There is no non-exam assessment.
3	Other GCSEs (with a focus on high-entry/EBacc subjects)	Achieving a number of GCSEs will usually be a requirement for progression to further education. In some subjects, there may be sufficient non-exam assessment to estimate grades for students who miss their exams. There is likely to be further prioritisation within this group, with large entry subjects prioritised over those with smaller entries (for example small entry languages).
4	Level 3 Applied General/Tech levels	These are used for HE entry, either alongside A levels or on their own. They are therefore important to allow students to progress. However, they include a substantial proportion of centre-assessed work which will already have been completed, and the unitised structure means that most students will have already taken some examined units. Where students miss exams and other assessments in summer 2020 there is, therefore, likely to be sufficient evidence to estimate grades. However, some subjects, for example where they confer a licence to practise, will need to



**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

		be considered as a high priority by each awarding organisation
5	Level 1 and 2 national VTQs, AS in England	<p>Level 1 and 2 national VTQs are generally taken alongside GCSEs, rather than instead of GCSEs. They also have a substantial proportion of centre-assessed work. Students may also have already taken some examined units, so there will be sufficient evidence available to estimate grades if necessary. AS qualifications in England tend to be taken by year 12 students halfway through their A level course. Very few are critical to HE entry.</p> <p><b>Note:</b> AS maths and AS further maths are likely to be exceptions because they are used for university entry and therefore higher priority.</p>

### **Annex 3: Options and detailed risk analysis**

#### **Option A: Additional papers - operate the timetable as published and offer additional contingency papers in a small number of subjects for students who miss exams**

This would mean that preparation for the summer series would carry on as planned, and exams (including those for BTECs and OCR Nationals) would take place according to the already published timetables, with results being issued later than scheduled.

Students will be advised that if they are “fit to sit” their exams, they should do so. This might require schools and colleges to prioritise students taking exams, where there are staff shortages due to illness. It would also mean that any government decision to close schools and colleges either regionally or nationally would need to exempt students due to sit exams – at least to allow them in to sit their exams and potentially to continue their education in the period between now and exams season. We would amend the current rules so that where necessary (and with safeguards to reduce malpractice risks) teachers could act as invigilators, scribes or readers, to ensure safe exam delivery.

For a number of high priority qualifications/subjects, additional papers (1 per specification) will be offered for those students who were unable to take any exams in that subject on the scheduled dates. It is likely that these would be at the end of the timetable, including the contingency day (Monday 15<sup>th</sup> to Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> June). This would mean that if a student missed all their exams in, for example, GCSE maths, they would sit one paper at the end of the timetable and get a grade based on their marks in that paper.

JCQ have advised schools and colleges that students should make themselves available up to and including 24 June.<sup>2</sup> Ofqual has also taken opportunities to remind schools, colleges, parents and students of the date.<sup>3</sup> However, it is possible that not all students and parents are aware and have made other plans.

Contingency papers would be prioritised in those qualifications/subjects where all exams are currently scheduled within 14 days or fewer (for example both papers for GCSE English language are in the week beginning 1 June). In these subjects, there is a greater chance that students who are ill would miss both/all papers. So far, we have identified the following priority subjects, where exams are all scheduled within a 14-day period and there is no non-exam assessment on which an estimated grade could be based. (Due to the relatively high proportion of internal assessment in national VTQs, we have not considered offering additional papers.)

Exam boards are already working to produce/finalise additional papers, so that they are ready if needed, in a number of qualifications/subjects which will include GCSE English language, GCSE maths and A level maths.

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example <https://www.icq.org.uk/exams-office/key-dates-and-timetables/key-dates-in-the-examination-cycle-2019-20>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/17/save-the-date-gcse-and-a-level-exam-contingency-day-2020/>

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

### Key advantage

- Greater certainty for students, parents, schools and colleges that exams will go ahead as currently planned

### Risks

- If large numbers of students are unwell and/or self-isolating for more than two weeks, they could still miss all exams in at least some of their subjects and we would need to move to a variant of option C.
- If behaviour changes because individuals think they can 'game' the system by preparing for only one paper, or simply by waiting for the estimated grades, then those students may be disadvantaged and the evidence that exam boards use to calculate grades would be weaker – advice that exams will continue as normal discourages such 'gaming' and the timing of when the precise paper that will be sat will be communicated needs careful consideration.
- Processing complexity caused by the additional contingency papers for exam boards (and schools) could lead to more errors and missing or incorrect results
- Where there are widespread security breaches as a result of papers being leaked, or opened on the wrong day and given to students, who can then share the contents, the usual contingency is to despatch a replacement paper at short notice to replace it. For those subjects where additional papers are being provided at the end of the timetable, exam boards are unlikely to be able to prepare a further additional paper as a contingency (given that they could also be also planning for scheduled papers and additional papers, provision of estimated grades and/or delays) and therefore there is a risk that a breached paper cannot be replaced.
- Delays to results days, because large numbers of students take their exams much later in the series which will mean marking is delayed (over and above any delays that might results from examiners being unwell), in order that all results are available at the same time
- Possible undesirable behaviours such as students not turning up to their second paper if they think an estimated grade (based on their performance in the first paper) will be issued anyway, students wanting to wait for the contingency paper to gain more revision time. We think we can mitigate these risks to some extent, but we cannot remove them completely
- One of the key sources of evidence for standard-setting is data on all assessments for a reasonable proportion of students (exams and non-exam assessment). Setting standards where large numbers of students have only sat one exam will be more challenging.
- This option means there is no scope to use the contingency day for its original purpose – to provide an opportunity for exam boards to re-run an exam in the event of, for example, a widespread leak of a paper (which of course is still possible) or another unforeseen national event

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

- There is a greater risk of error in the production of the modified versions of these papers (for those students with visual or hearing impairments) due to the increased workload and reduced timeframe

### **Option B: Delay: postpone the start of exam timetable (including for BTECs, OCR Nationals and other performance table qualifications)**

This option would involve changing the start date for the GCSE and A level timetable (currently 11 May) to a date later in May, June or July (or further) and then running the timetable as planned. If there is a peak of infection in May/early June, this option would mean that exams could take place after that peak.

Because the timetables for high-volume national vocational and technical qualifications used in performance tables (in particular BTECs, OCR Nationals) are aligned with GCSE/A level (starting in England on 11 May but earlier in Wales and Northern Ireland), this option would also likely require those qualifications to be delayed, because the majority of schools/colleges will use both.

We considered whether different qualifications might be delayed by different lengths of time. For example, AS might be delayed until September as relatively few students will rely on those results for HE admission, whereas A level might only be delayed by a few weeks.

Note: this option is based on some important assumptions.

1. That it is too late to amend the dates on papers that are already printed or currently being printed. This introduces additional risks around schools giving students the correct papers on the correct days, given that the dates on the papers will not be the dates when the papers are actually sat. Even in a 'normal' year, we see instances where students sit the paper that is due to be taken the following week, risking the confidentiality of the questions. Those risks are increased where the exam is intentionally taken on date different to that on the paper.
2. That no school or college would be permitted to sit the exams according to the original timetable. If this did happen, it would compromise the security of the papers.
3. That existing entries would carry forward into the delayed exams.

#### Advantages:

- If the forecast peak in May/June occurs, delaying the exam timetable until after the peak infection period could potentially mean that more students are fit and able to take their exams.

#### Risks

- If a peak occurs later than currently forecast, or if the impact turns out to be much less than forecast, the vast majority of students could be fit and well during the original timetable period, and we will have caused widespread

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

disruption for schools and colleges, and anxiety for students, with no benefit. This is in the context of the need to make a decision by **23 March** to delay, at which point we might not be sufficiently confident in the projections for peak infection.

- It is possible that students are fit and well during the original timetable period but not for the delayed exams.
- Availability of invigilators (many of whom are retired and so might be unwell or self-isolating in any case), scribes and readers might be limited for any delayed exams.
- JCQ have communicated to schools/colleges that students should make sure they are available from the date of their first exam up to and including the contingency day (24 June). Even so, it is not clear that all students would be available if necessary. However, moving exams to any dates beyond 24 June could mean that large numbers of students are not available. Lengthy delays, perhaps into the summer holiday or autumn term increase the likelihood that some students, particularly some of the most vulnerable, might not attend a delayed series. In addition, staff in schools may not be available and schools will no longer have capacity to conduct exams because capacity for exams is, in most schools and colleges, created by the year group leaving for study leave.
- It is difficult at this stage to predict the risks associated with changing key dates in exam board systems. 'Basedata' issued to schools, colleges and MIS suppliers hold the exam timetable dates as key dates. These are also used in exam board systems to trigger key activities. There may be unforeseen consequences of changing these dates without proper review and testing.
- The majority of question papers are already printed with current dates. Exam boards have made clear that there is not time (or sufficient paper stocks) to re-print with amended dates. Leaving papers with the current dates and expecting schools/colleges to use a 'look-up table' of old/new dates would mean a much greater likelihood of security breaches – papers being opened on the wrong day and given to students, who can then share the contents – because students are given the wrong paper. This could cause confusion and anxiety in schools and could jeopardise the validity of results in some subjects, potentially undermining confidence in the results. Where this happens currently, it is almost always detected before the end of the exam, and students are usually able to take the correct exam the same day. In a delay scenario, it might be more likely that this happens without anyone realising, which increases the risk that students share confidential material.
- Exam paper despatches are currently carefully timed so that confidential papers are in schools and colleges for as short a period as possible, and also bearing in mind the limits of secure storage space in schools and colleges. If exams are delayed, and despatches continue as planned, there is a risk that schools do not have enough secure storage (because earlier papers won't have been sat and so will need to remain in storage when the subsequent despatches arrive). It would therefore be essential to give schools/colleges as much notice as possible of this option so that they could make arrangements

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

for additional storage. Making changes to despatch schedules would be dependent on third party supplier capacity.

- Script scanning is often dependent on the availability of temporary workers in third party agencies. Delays may mean that scanning capacity is lower than originally planned.
- Examiners (many of whom are also teachers) will have made themselves available for the current marking periods. While it is possible that fewer examiners are ill because of the delay, this is counteracted by other factors. In high volume subjects such as GCSE English language, any changes to the timetable increase the risks that marking is delayed because examiners have already booked holidays or (in the case of teachers) because they have to return to work in September. It is likely that any delays to the start of the timetable would be amplified in terms of delays to issue of results. Thus a delay of 2 to 3 weeks at the start of the timetable could mean at least some results are not available until late September or later. Exam boards have told us that they cannot accurately estimate the likely impact on results days without knowing how many examiners might still be available. It may also be necessary for DfE to intervene if it was necessary for examiners to prioritise marking over teaching in the autumn term.
- Any delay, even if only by a few weeks, will have knock-on effects for entry to sixth form/FE college for level 3 courses, and for HE admissions, delaying any selection decisions and thus potentially delaying the start of teaching in the autumn term. UCAS have been clear that 31 August would be the latest that HE admissions systems could accommodate.
- Any delay would also impact the Reviews of Marking and Moderation period, particularly the Priority reviews at A level which are used by students and universities to finalise their offers

### **Option C: Issue grades based on teacher estimates which have been statistically moderated at a centre / cohort level to bring them into line with previous years' results**

This option could be triggered if it becomes clear that, regardless of whether option A or option B had been taken, the level of disruption is such that large numbers of students are unable to take exams, either due to illness/isolation or due to national/regional school closures. This could be optional, with students taking a decision to opt in to receive an estimated grade (the alternative being to wait until the next assessment opportunity).

We would ask schools to submit a granular estimated grade (e.g. A++, A+, A, A-, A—etc.), either through exam boards or centrally, for each of their students for every subject entered. This might be supplemented by other information such as putting students in a rank order (to support the statistical moderation). We would then use prior attainment data (e.g. Key Stage 2) and other statistical evidence (such as historical outcomes within each school and college) to moderate the estimated

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

grades to try to ensure that grades were comparable between schools and colleges and over time.

Our assumption is that exam boards would collect estimated grades from schools and colleges, but that either exam boards or Ofqual could calculate the statistically moderated final grades. We have also assumed that if this option were to be put in place, while all students would need to receive results at the same time, the usual 'results days' press conferences and briefings would not take place.

As for options A and B, it is likely that we would need to contact schools for this option before we know whether or not it will be needed, in order to make sure we have teacher estimates for all students. We have already started talking to the exam board technical standards and assessment teams about the methodology to be used for generating estimates if this was necessary. No work has yet been carried out to assess whether exam boards' IT systems could manage this scenario. In order to make sure the data is collected and checked for completeness, exam boards will need to send instructions to schools by **25 March**.

### Advantages

- While this option is far from ideal, it would mean that students would have grades which could be used to determine progression to the next stage of education or employment, and therefore mitigates the risk that substantial numbers of students receive no qualifications, which would put them at a disadvantage in future.

### Risks

- The credibility of any estimated grades may be questioned, particularly in cases where students' grades are much worse (or better) than expected
- Teacher estimates will inevitably include some conscious or unconscious bias often in the students' favour, which is likely to vary between teachers and between schools. Estimates will not be able to take account of students who, had they taken their exams, would have done much worse, or much better, than their teachers predicted. Further, research evidence shows that teacher estimates tend to be unduly optimistic on average and can be biased. For example, some evidence suggests that particular social and ethnic groups are unfairly disadvantaged in estimates. It will be challenging, if not impossible, to attempt to moderate estimates in a way that is fair for all this year's students. Moderation will, however, ameliorate the more obvious unfairness.
- Schools and students will be unable to use the usual routes to challenge results produced in this way, whereas if students take their exams, they would be able to challenge the marking. Students, parents and schools might see this as unfair.
- Every year there are a small number of students who miss all exams/assessments because of tragic or challenging circumstances, but exam boards have never awarded grades. Instead they have offered honorary certificates. Exam boards would want some assurance that this did not set a

## OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

precedent that would open them up to legal challenge in future or re-open historic decisions.

- While it may be possible to achieve an overall statistical fit between the estimated grade, rank order and other evidence, individual students may feel that their final grade is not that which they should be awarded. Ofqual and exam boards may be subject to legal challenge over this approach.



**Annex 4: Alternative contingency options considered**

We have been asked to consider all possible options. Those below are not presented in the main paper because they were less likely to meet our objectives set out above, and we have not tested the feasibility with exam boards.

Note: the normal exam window is six and a half weeks long

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
<p>D. Bring all exams forward by 3 weeks to start on 20<sup>th</sup> April</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely that the peak of infection will not yet have arrived, most students fit to sit</li> <li>• no need for extra papers to be written</li> <li>• no impact on student progression</li> <li>• no impact on HE</li> <li>• markers can mark in the usual window or it can be extended to cover illness</li> <li>• grade boundary setting could possibly take place over a longer period</li> <li>• results days can happen as usual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers and students are likely to feel that it is unfair as they haven't had all the usual time to prepare</li> <li>• Depending on the strategy taken by individual students or centres, this approach would have a differential impact on outcomes</li> <li>• Students (and teachers) likely to be highly anxious</li> <li>• Centres will be unprepared for the change and will need to free accommodation (cancelling other activities), source invigilators at late notice and so on</li> <li>• What to do with students when they finish in early June?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have not tested the feasibility of this with exam boards and the decision would need to be very prompt</li> <li>• Centres would have to open and exam officers be present over Easter to receive papers</li> <li>• The logistical challenges are unknown at this point e.g. do Parcelforce / couriers have the capacity to deliver (and collect) exam papers to this new timetable</li> <li>• It is likely that a decision to bring forward would need to be made by <b>20 March at the very latest</b></li> </ul>

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
<p>E. Delay all exams until August</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it likely the peak will have passed and most students will be fit to sit?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results will not be available for use in normal 6th form, FE and HE admission decisions</li> <li>• Students will have had a considerable gap between last teaching and assessments – added anxiety and depressed performance which will impact some groups more than others</li> <li>• Schools would normally be closed and teachers on holiday</li> <li>• Markers might not make themselves available because of clashes with holidays/overlap with the autumn term</li> <li>• Some centres are used for other activities during the holiday period</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If it was desirable to make the decision to delay at a late point, exam papers might sit within centres for some time with a heightened risk of security breach</li> <li>• HE academic year could be delayed to allow A level grades to be used</li> <li>• Colleges could use teacher estimates or references to make entry decisions</li> </ul>
<p>F. Delay all exams until September</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Likely the peak will have passed, most students will be fit to sit</li> <li>• Schools and colleges will be open as planned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Results will not be available for use in normal 6th form, FE and HE admission decisions</li> <li>• Students will have had a considerable gap</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HE academic year could be delayed to allow A level grades to be used – probably delay needed until January</li> </ul>

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potentially avoids the possibility of a mixed approach to giving students grades – normal grades for those who attend, partial estimates for those who attend one paper and complete teacher estimates for those who are ill (should this be invoked) and the real and perceived fairness issues this would involve</li> </ul>	<p>between last teaching and assessments – added anxiety and depressed performance/lower grade boundaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Markers might not make themselves available because of clashes because they will be teaching new cohort</li> <li>Impact on teaching and learning on the courses to which students progress – they would not be able to cover the normal curriculum unless the academic year was extended</li> <li>Impact on the teaching and learning of other cohorts as resource is diverted to running the exams</li> <li>Schools and colleges will not have capacity to conduct either exams or teaching because exam capacity is created by</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government might need to consider whether to pay benefits to unemployed students before they start their HE courses</li> </ul>

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
<p>G. Run an elongated timetable – all planned exams to take place but over an extended period eg 11 May – mid-July with maximum possible spacing between papers within a qualification</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater chance of every student being able to take at least one paper in each subject, allowing most students to be given a grade based on some evidence of their performance</li> <li>• no need for extra papers to be written</li> </ul>	<p>students leaving the institution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exams still going on in the likely peak of infection</li> <li>• Extra pressures on schools and colleges running an extended exam period – demands on invigilators, accommodation etc when their own staffing resources likely to be affected to a greater or lesser extent</li> <li>• Increased student anxiety as period of exam pressures extended</li> <li>• Delays to marking and results, as exams will be taken later than scheduled</li> <li>• Impact on students’ post exams plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This would require the creation of an entirely new timetable and its novelty may increase system risks such as deviation and consequent security breaches</li> </ul>
<p>H. Reschedule high entry exams to the start of the timetable in the hope of beating the peak</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More students might be able to sit at least some exams – if the current modelling is correct</li> <li>• Marking can start – assuming sufficient well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modelling is dynamic and the peak might be earlier. If so, changes will create a worse position than the original timetable</li> </ul>	

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
	<p>markers - so results less likely to be delayed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timetabling high entry subjects within a confined period is likely to be difficult as many clashes will need to be accommodated. The usual approach to handling clashes is to put students in quarantine and administer the affected exam asap – this is hard to do at scale and without risk</li> <li>• Risk of a security breach as dates are changed – the wrong papers being given out in some centres</li> <li>• Students’ revision planning will be disrupted</li> <li>• Not all subjects will be accommodated – accusations of unfairness if some subjects prioritised over others</li> <li>• Increased student anxiety in adapting to a new timetable and in the knowledge that they need to get exams out of the</li> </ul>	

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
		<p>way before infection peaks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Complaints about several hours of exams in one day</li> </ul>	
<p>I. Run a reduced timetable – GCSE English and maths only, all A levels, AS in maths and further maths only</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The timetable could be adapted to accommodate 2/3 opportunities to take GCSE English and maths – different papers would need to be produced – in the expectation that most students would be able to take most papers in both subjects.</li> <li>For other GCSE subjects estimated grades could be issued using maths and English grades to moderate teacher estimates</li> <li>A level papers could be spread over the timetable increasing the likelihood of a student being able to take at least one paper in each subject</li> <li>Less impact on HE entry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Once announced, GCSE students would stop studying for the other subjects – negative impact on their learning and on the school environment (assuming schools not closed)</li> <li>Increased risk of exam security breach if wrong papers are issued because of A level timetable change</li> <li>Could fuel calls for GCSEs to be scrapped</li> <li>Perceptions that government does not value other subjects eg arts and science</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>GCSEs with non-exam assessment could be graded on this limited basis</li> <li>Suggest running AS in maths and further maths because the highest volume AS and valued for progression</li> <li>Possible that AS in other subjects could be offered alongside November sitting of GCSE English and maths re-sits</li> <li>Might see performance in GCSE English and maths improve because of the increased focus on these subjects (assuming schools still open)</li> </ul>

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
<p>J. Run a condensed and reduced timetable – GCSE English and maths only, all A levels, AS in maths and further maths only – in the hope of beating the peak</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The possibility that by missing the peak more students would be able to sit the most important exams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The modelling is dynamic and the peak might coincide with the timetable period. The changes will have created a worse position than the original timetable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is the possibility of using just one paper for each qualification to allow a short exam timetable – this might be appropriate if the growth of infection is sharply increasing</li> </ul>
<p>K. Issue a standardised leaving certificate detailing teachers' estimates of grades with brief commentary – this would enable students to progress to further education or HE. Could use a standard template that included a statement from DfE/regulators about the context of 2020. GCSE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers are seen as the best judge of their students' progress at a particular point</li> <li>• May command more public confidence than estimated grades which will require moderation which is likely to be seen as a statistical fix</li> <li>• It is possibly the only option that means all students are treated in a consistent way, and is therefore less likely to widen any 'disadvantage gap' than, for example, delayed exams where some students will not have a background likely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cannot mitigate any conscious or unconscious bias on the part of teachers (but neither can option C - moderated estimated grades)</li> <li>• There would be no moderation of these grades, which would mean no publication of national results, and no accountability measures applying to 2020 results</li> <li>• Schools might complain about the work involved, (although this could be done during any period of school closure)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A decision to move to this option would also need to be made relatively quickly, by the end of March, so that question paper despatches could be halted. That would enable the questions in the 2020 papers to be re-used for 2021.</li> <li>• We propose that this data should not be collected centrally, as this might prompt concerns that it was likely to be used for accountability or other purposes.</li> </ul>

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

Option considered	Arguments in favour	Arguments against	Comments
<p>students could take English and maths in the November re-sit series if they wished. The leaving certificate would be promoted as having currency for this year's cohort but would be transparent in its basis (on teacher estimates).</p>	<p>to support sustained focus on gaining qualifications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers may be less likely to inflate grades if the school is accountable for the certificates and if grades are not used for accountability purposes</li> <li>• Minimises anxiety for students at a time when members of their immediate family might be at risk and/or ill</li> <li>• Avoids the potential unfairness inherent in any of the options that involve students taking exams when schools are closed, or delaying exams and expecting students to attend in August or autumn term</li> <li>• Will be seen by some as showing trust in the teaching profession during these difficult times</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schools are also likely to expect a refund of exam fees</li> <li>• Could disadvantage students in future education/employment opportunities if they are competing with students who have grades unless the leaving certificate was promoted as having currency</li> <li>• If a decision is taken to move to this option, it will be difficult to motivate students to attend school/carry on working even if schools are open (receiving the certificate could not be dependent on continued attendance in the current circumstances)</li> <li>• This would call into question the future of GCSEs</li> </ul>	