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Secretary of State

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
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Thank you for the opportunity to discuss a range of important issues and for the Committee's input on these matters at my accountability hearing on 16th September. I am writing to provide additional information and clarification.

Qualifications 2020

The Committee asked several questions around the decision to go with calculated grades and the impact this would have on disadvantaged students. To clarify the position, we wanted to be sure that there was no widening of the attainment gaps for disadvantaged and BAME students as a result of the calculated grades process. Ofqual's initial analysis (shared at its summer symposium and published on gov.uk on 21 July) indicated that these groups of students would not lose out. The finalised data for A and AS levels published in Ofqual's technical report confirmed that this position had not changed.

The decision to award the centre assessment grade or the calculated grade, whichever was higher, demonstrates the commitment to ensuring fairness. Ofqual is carrying out further analyses of the revised grades awarded following that decision. This will be published by the end of the year, but I understand that early indications suggest that there are no material differences in attainment gaps between different groups of students for the grades eventually awarded compared with the calculated grades that would have been issued.

Separately, Ian Mearns asked about the accuracy of marking in normal exam years, with reference to Ofqual's November 2019 marking consistency research. To clarify the findings of that report, it points to the fact that whilst in some assessments there is a "single right mark" answer, for many assessments different – but equally legitimate – marks can be awarded for the same answer by properly trained expert examiners.

The implication of there not being a single, right mark for every answer given in every subject is that more than one grade can be a legitimate reflection of a student's performance and either would be a sound estimate of that student's

ability at that point in time based on the available evidence from the assessment they have undertaken. This is not a new finding; the issue has existed as long as qualifications have been marked and graded and is of course not only an issue in GCSEs and A levels, but in other types of qualification too.

The challenge, therefore, is to make marking as good as it can be in every subject, in the context of the style of the assessment. In assessments that rely on examiners exercising their academic judgement, Ofqual expects mark schemes and training to be of high quality and for examiners to be closely monitored to make sure that examiner judgement is being applied appropriately. For other assessments, where there is a single right mark, it expects the right mark to always be awarded.

Learning Loss & 2021 Exams timing

The Committee asked about the work the Department is doing to understand the impact of learning loss and how this will inform decisions around the timetable of exams next year. As the Permanent Secretary mentioned, the priority is confirming the decisions around exam timing, which as I mentioned to the Committee, we plan to do this month. As it takes time to validate the data from schools using assessments over the autumn term, we will look to use the analysis on learning loss subsequent to the decision on the timing of exams, to inform departmental policy for the coming year.

Behaviour Hubs

In relation to a question on exclusions from Kim Johnson MP, I would like to clarify that it is our expectation that the behaviour hubs programme will have a positive impact on behaviour and could reduce rates of exclusion in school. The first hubs are planned to launch in Spring 2021 and will run for an initial period of 3 years. The £10m behaviour hubs programme will enable lead schools and multi academy trusts with exemplary behaviour to work in close partnership with those that need and want to improve their behaviour culture and practices, alongside a central offer of support and a taskforce of advisers.

Finally, thank you for your letter of 18th September asking for certain documents in relation to 2020 exams to be shared with the Committee. I have asked my officials to speak with your Clerk on the matter. I remain committed to transparency and openness as far as possible but as I mentioned to the Committee, I need to balance that against the importance of protecting a "safe space" for debate between officials and Ministers, and between the Department and Ofqual, in line with the principles of the Freedom of Information Act.

Thank you again for your interest in the importance of these matters. I hope these clarifications are helpful.



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Secretary of State for Education