



Education Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Robert Halfon MP, Chair

Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

15 December 2020

Exams 2021

Dear Gavin,

We were grateful to the Minister for School Standards and Dame Glenys Stacey for appearing before us last week. It was helpful to discuss the package of measures aimed at allowing exams to take place this summer. Following our session, we would like to pursue four areas with you.

Grade inflation

Ofqual has decided to extend the higher grades awarded in 2020 to 2021, but to balance out this inflation in 2021 more evenly across all subjects. The principal reason for doing this, we understand, is to allow fairness between students taking exams in these years affected by the pandemic and because Ofqual's research found virtually no support for returning to established standards in the year ahead. We discussed this at some length during the session. In short, we need a route map to transition back to the grade standards that existed prior to the pandemic so that we know for sure that grade inflation has not been permanently baked into the system.

Putting the merits of Ofqual's decision and approach on how to allow 'generosity' to one side, we are keen to know your current thinking on how the 2020 grade inflation can be washed out of the system once you deem it is appropriate to do so. We would ask that you set out how you see this working.

Contingency plans

We know that there has been severe disruption to many pupils' learning and that this has disproportionately affected certain children, mostly due to where they live and to their personal home circumstances. While the package of measures will go some way to address this variation and help all students prepare for exams, it is likely that those who suffered most will remain in a weaker position and at a comparative disadvantage.

At this point in time, we do not know to what degree schools and student learning will continue to be impacted by Covid and the pattern of local incidences of the virus. It

would therefore also be helpful to know what will happen in cases where it is known that certain students, through no fault of their own, have experienced ongoing disruptions to their learning, and even if they were available to sit exams, could not be expected to do so on a fair basis. The numbers facing this prospect could be significant. What contingencies are planned for this instance or, indeed, if parts of the country were to face a further wave of the virus in the spring. If 'validated' teacher assessments are to be used in some cases, how will they work? We would ask that you share information on how the special consideration process will work and how it is being stress-tested.

Ofqual have stated that they anticipate being able to pre-announce in January the subject and topic areas that will feature in this summer's exams. This must happen as soon as possible and there needs to be absolute clarity on the further adaptations for both general and voluntary and technical qualifications, so that revision can be planned now to reduce anxiety on all students. We believe the adaptations to general qualifications and VTQs should, as far as is feasible, be commensurate with each other. In respect of exam topics being announced in advance, we would welcome more information on how these areas are being determined.

The Government's preferred approach to running exams this summer will put exceptional demands on exam boards and schools and mean that they will face additional costs. Therefore, it would be prudent for the Department to organise a recruitment of volunteer markers and invigilators, who would be qualified to take on this task, for instance calling on former teachers and teaching support staff to help. Under this initiative, the Department should be expected to cover the extra costs, such as charges for DBS checks and volunteers' incidental expenses.

Advisory Panel on differential learning

We discussed the panel which will advise you on the issues associated with differential learning. This panel will need to start its work as soon as possible so that there is sufficient time for its recommendations to be actioned. It will need to operate in a transparent way, publishing its advice and recommendations openly, as we believe this should go a long way to avoid a recurrence of the problems we saw earlier this year with the development of a system for calculating grades. Allowing public understanding and scrutiny of the issues under consideration will be of great benefit to all in finding solutions that are likely to work and garner confidence.

We would welcome more information from you on the membership of this advisory panel and how it will operate. We believe the panel should include school representatives from areas across the country most impacted by disruptions and the pandemic. We are interested to know by when the advisory panel will be asked to confirm any further changes that are needed and if you remain open to acting on any recommendations relating to this summer's exam series.

School attendance data

It will be important that school attendance data are published weekly on both a national and local basis and by school year, particularly for those students in exam years and leading up to exam years. Ideally this information would be collated at a postcode level, so that more refined data are available to show the cumulative impact on students in different parts of the country. Provided this is not too burdensome on schools themselves, this information will help all see the scale and variation of what is happening. Can you commit to the Department collecting and publishing these data as soon as possible?

Finally, we want to record our recognition of the contribution that Dame Glenys has made in returning to Ofqual at a particularly turbulent time for the organisation and for the country. She has shown true dedication to public service and should be commended for stepping in to take on such a complex problem.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Halfon'.

Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee