



Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith Street, Westminster, London, SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

2 February 2021

Dear Rob,

Following my appearance before the committee on 8 December 2020, I am writing to provide additional information to the committee.

Update to Exams in 2021

As you will be aware, the situation regarding exams and assessments in 2021 has shifted since we met on 8 December. I have written to you separately providing a full update, and the Secretary of State and Permanent Secretary have appeared before you for additional questioning.

When we spoke in December, I emphasised that the top priority of the department is to ensure that all students have a fair and safe opportunity to receive a grade this summer. While the Department continues to believe that exams are the fairest way of judging students' performance, we cannot guarantee all students will be in a position to fairly sit their exams this summer. We have therefore confirmed that GCSEs, A and AS level exams will not go ahead this summer as planned.

We have already confirmed our proposals that in summer 2021, students taking GCSE, AS and A levels regulated by Ofqual should be awarded grades based on an assessment by their teachers. As you will be aware, the department and Ofqual have now launched a two-week consultation to confirm the details on how grades will be awarded. We also recognise that students taking vocational, technical and other general qualifications used for progression will have suffered similar levels of disruption, and we want to ensure that students taking these qualifications are not disadvantaged in comparison to their peers taking GCSEs, AS and A levels.

I understand your concerns about how grades were calculated in 2020. I

would like to reassure you that the Department has learned lessons from last year's experience, and we will place trust in teachers, supported with DfE and exam board guidance and a system of internal and external quality assurance, to make assessments of the students they teach.

Discussions with Employers

You asked about the direct consultations we had with employers about grading. Following the decision to move to a form of teacher assessment, Ofqual and the department have launched a joint consultation and encourage all our stakeholders, including employers, to respond. We are continuing to work closely with employers to ensure that students are able to progress to employment in a way that is fair and reflective of the disruption to their education that they have experienced. On 19 January, following the launch of the consultation, DfE and Ofqual held a joint conversation with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Institute of Directors, MAKE UK, the Federation of Small Businesses and the British Chambers of Commerce. All organisations agreed to engage their members over the course of the consultation and encourage them to respond directly. In the discussion, the organisations informed us that their members would want clarity on any changes so they could assess how it may affect them. They want to be confident in the qualifications and be assured that standards have been maintained. Finally, they also said that they would value consistency in the way qualifications are awarded regardless of where you are in the country.

Before the 3 December announcement on plans for exams, we engaged with the following employer organisations: the Confederation of British Industry (CBI); the Federation of Small Businesses; British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors. These organisations did not raise any concerns about the proposed package of measures. Their feedback suggested that employers would likely be broadly supportive of the measures introduced and that the grading approach for 2021 was the fairest approach for students in the circumstances.

Expert Group Access to Datasets

In light of the decision to cancel exams, the Department is refocusing the Expert Advisory Group on Lost Learning and is working to finalise the terms of reference and membership. We will ensure that membership is representative of the sector and is geographically diverse. Further details on membership and priorities of the group will be provided in due course.

Ian Mearns MP asked what datasets DfE will provide to the expert advisory group. I can confirm that the group will have access to the full range of relevant analysis that DfE holds. This will include data on school daily attendance, information from DfE's research into lost education, the termly census of schools, and the results of student and parent surveys. Data protection requirements will be followed at all times. In some cases this may

include confidential access ahead of publication in order to inform policy development but the department will ensure that the relevant analysis is published ahead of the expert advisory group making any final recommendations.

Exams Years Data

You asked about whether the department will collect exams years attendance data. The department currently asks all schools to submit information about the attendance of pupils and staff on a daily basis. We recognise the burden this places upon school staff at a difficult time. I asked officials to bring forward proposals on how data on attendance for exam year groups could be gathered and an assessment of the burden this would impose on schools. This work has taken place, but given the decision to cancel GCSE and A level exams, and the closure of schools to most pupils, this has not been incorporated into the current collection.

The school census, which is currently being collected, includes the collection of absence data for the autumn term. This collection is pupil level data and will provide detailed information on absence, including absence rates for individual year groups.

Remote Education Expectations

In my appearance before the committee, you asked about the DfE's expectations of the requirements of remote education and the changes we have made since they were first published on 2 July 2020.

We last updated the remote education guidance for schools and colleges on 7 January to clarify and strengthen expectations while on-site attendance is restricted, drawing on our evolving understanding of best practice in remote education.

As part of this update, schools are now expected to provide online lessons and a set number of hours of remote education for pupils – increased from the government's previous minimum expectations – that includes time for independent study and also either recorded or live direct teaching. Ofsted will play an important role in holding schools to account for the quality of remote education they are providing.

Colleges are expected to continue to deliver as much of students' planned hours as possible, provide students with regular feedback on their progress and, as far as possible, provide students with live online teaching in lieu of face to face delivery.

Additionally, schools and colleges are expected to have published information about their remote education provision on their websites by 18 January for

colleges and 25 January for schools.

More information on the latest remote education expectations can be found as part of the [guidance on restricting attendance during the national lockdown](#).

Breakfast Clubs

You asked about expanding breakfast clubs. The department is investing up to £38 million in the National School Breakfast Programme, using funds from Soft Drinks Industry Levy revenues. The programme, running from March 2018 until July 2021, is delivered by Family Action and Magic Breakfast. We are considering options for breakfast provision beyond July, and have engaged with the market through a Public Information Notice to help develop those options.

Thank you for your continued interest in these matters, and I hope that these clarifications are helpful.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick', is positioned above the typed name.

Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards