



Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

21 April 2021

Dear Mr Halfon,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before your Committee on 9 March and explain the arrangements being put in place for regulated qualifications this summer. I am writing to provide information on some matters raised during our appearance and one included in your recent letter to the Secretary of State that specifically refers to the evidence we gave.

Release of 2020 GCSE and A level awarding data

We remain committed to making sure lessons are learned from summer 2020. We have worked with UCAS, the Department for Education and Ofsted to make available all the data we used in the 2020 standardisation model (including centre assessment grades), the model's outcomes, and the final grades issued, alongside a wider range of data. We have had to acquire data from other organisations and link it to our data. This will allow further analysis – including consideration of the relationship between summer 2020 results and other measures (such as university application and attainment data and, eventually, degree outcomes) – and independent review of the model we developed. To allow for this evaluation, we are not only sharing data from 2020 but also from previous years. We plan to make the range of data available to accredited researchers via the Office for National Statistics' Secure Research Service.

As part of this project, we have asked Professor Julius Weinberg to chair an expert group to provide advice on how data on schools' and young people's performance could be better and more widely shared to ensure good practice in the sharing of personal data. Our aim is to improve research that enhances the quality of our qualifications system. The full range of this work is set out [here](#).

This data-sharing project aims to support Ofqual and the wider system to learn from last summer's awarding process. The data we intend to share contains personal data, including on protected characteristics, and it is imperative that we put in place the necessary arrangements and safeguards before transferring the data into the Office for National Statistics' Secure Research

Service for external researchers to access. We intend that researchers will be able to apply to access this data from May, subject to us being able, as we expect, to address the outstanding data protection issues to that timescale.

National Reference Test

The committee asked about the assessments of lost learning that are being made at present. We highlighted the role the National Reference Test (NRT) can play in this.

We contract with NFER to provide the NRT each year, which is designed to detect and measure changes in year 11 students' performance in mathematics and English over time.

While the results of the NRT will not be used in GCSE awarding this year, they will provide important evidence about the impact of lost learning on the current year 11 cohort. As we have benchmark data for this test in every year from 2017, the NRT can provide unique insights into the impact of the pandemic on young people's learning. The NRT also provides valuable longitudinal data which can be used in future years to help set standards in GCSE English language and maths. We will publish the results from this year's NRT in the summer, and will be happy to discuss the findings and their implications with the committee at a future appearance.

Accuracy of exam marking

During the session, Ian Mearns said "We should remember that the former chair of Ofqual told us that up to 25% of grades could be inaccurate by one grade plus or minus." My predecessor [wrote to the committee](#), following our last appearance where a similar question was asked, to clarify the findings of the data analysis we have conducted into marking consistency and make our views on it clear.

As we set out in detail in our earlier letter, our research into marking of exams in GCSE, AS and A levels shows that the majority of grades awarded are the same as those that would be awarded if the work had been marked by a different senior examiner. Where two examiners give different marks for an answer to an extended response question, it does not follow in any way that automatically one of the marks is wrong and the other right. Rather it often reflects the fact that two examiners can legitimately give the same work slightly different marks. In some cases, this could result in different grades. Therefore, it is not our view that all differences in marking or the overall grade awarded represent inaccuracies in the marking or grading process. In fact that would be a mischaracterisation of the data and [our research](#) as that is not what it shows.

This is not a new issue, nor is it unique to GCSEs and A levels; it is something that has existed as long as qualifications have been marked and graded. We would also note that in fact the research suggests that overall the quality of marking of GCSEs, AS and A levels in England is good, and compares favourably to other examination systems internationally. If the committee would find it helpful, we would welcome the opportunity to send further details of our findings, or to explore them at a future appearance.

Students 'insisting' on taking exam board papers

In your recent letter to DfE you suggested that it was our view that students could "insist" on being able to take exam board provided papers should they wish to do so. This is not the position. Students will not be able to insist that

they are assessed in a particular way or that their grade is based on evidence of their choosing. They will be permitted, however, if they have specific concerns about the way in which they are assessed, to raise the matter as explained in more detail below.

At our appearance we set out that it was our general expectation that there would be consistency in the evidence used by a school or college to assess their students with “flexibility around the edges with pupils for whom it may be appropriate to use different portfolios of evidence”. As reflected in the subsequent JCQ guidance on this issue this might, for example, be to reflect the particular reasonable adjustment a disabled student is entitled to or exceptionally because of the specific and unusual circumstances the pandemic has caused for a student.

We also noted that it is an important principle of transparency in this year’s arrangements, that candidates should know on what evidence their grade has been determined. We highlighted that this would allow a student to raise any concerns about the way in which they have been assessed. In any such case the student would need to show why an approach had been unfair, in order for a school or college to consider if it needed to do anything differently. We highlighted at the appearance that there might be cases in which a school or college could decide, before or after such a conversation, that a particular student would take an assessment, including an assessment based on the exam board provided papers, that the rest of their cohort did not. This would be to respond to particular circumstances such as those described above, but it will be rare and the decision of the school or college not the student.

It is important that such issues are considered as matters of teachers’ professional judgement. Teachers, in making these judgements, will work within the framework of exam board guidance and the policy their school or college puts in place in the light of this guidance. Teachers will be accountable to their heads of centre for doing so and for acting with professional integrity.

I trust this further information is helpful. I will be happy to provide further information if there are any other matters on which we can assist the committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'S Lebus', with a stylized, flowing script.

Simon Lebus

Interim Chief Regulator