



**Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
Minister of State for School Standards

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

27 April 2021

Dear Robert,

Thank you for your letter to the Secretary of State of 23 March outlining your concerns about the process for awarding qualifications in 2021. We are grateful for your thoughts and insight into the arrangements we are making. I have been asked to respond on behalf of the Secretary of State.

I agree with you that exams remain the best way of judging student performance. The decision not to hold exams this year was not taken lightly, and I appreciate the acknowledgement from the committee that cancelling exams this summer was an unfortunate but necessary step in the department's response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

The interests of students remain at the core of our approach to awarding qualifications and I know that teachers have been working hard throughout the pandemic to deliver a high-quality remote education. Schools' and colleges' ability to teach the entire curriculum and provide the usual exam preparation support was, however, unavoidably impacted by the pandemic. The variable disruption faced by institutions and students meant that unfortunately exams this year could not be held in a way that was, or was perceived to be, fair. The flexibility of our approach also gives schools the opportunity to increase teaching time, so that their pupils can be as prepared as possible to progress to the next stage of their education, training, or employment.

This letter will cover GCSE, AS and A-levels and other qualifications that are awarded in the same way. Our aim throughout this process has been to enable students to have the best possible chance to show what they know and can do. I have therefore been clear that students should only be assessed on the content they have been taught, not what they have missed. In the absence of exams, this year's approach ensures a fair process is in place for awarding grades. We trust teachers' judgements as they are best placed to understand the content students have covered, their students' performance and how they compare to other students this year and in previous years. Teacher assessed grades will allow results to be based on the knowledge students have acquired based on what they

have been taught, recognising the variability in teaching that some young people have experienced.

### **Teacher Assessed Grades**

Since my appearance with you in March and following your letter, the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) has now published clear guidance for centres to support them to determine teacher assessed grades. The guidance provides detailed information to schools and colleges on the grading process and the different factors that need to be accounted for; the support that Awarding organisations have and will continue to provide; and the robust arrangements that will be in place for internal and external quality assurance. I am confident that this system of teacher assessed grades, underpinned by this new guidance, will ensure that students can be assured that the grades they receive are as fair and consistent as possible.

Exam boards have provided grade descriptors and exemplar materials to support teachers in making an evidence-based judgement of the grade at which each student is performing. The grade descriptors and materials exemplify the established performance standard that is maintained each year by awarding organisations. To ensure that there is a common basis to all teacher assessed grades, teachers are being asked to apply the performance standards described in the grade descriptors to the evidence from a student's work this year. We trust teachers will be able to use their professional judgement when determining a grade using the guidance provided on the standards of performance and through comparison of their students' work with the grade descriptors. Teachers will already have a good understanding of their students' performance which they can continue to develop throughout the time remaining.

The department has not set a minimum content coverage requirement this year. It is important that students have been taught enough content to enable them to progress to the next stage of their education or to employment, but it is difficult to define precisely what that means for individual students who will have different planned progression routes. Concerns were also raised that setting a minimum content requirement could lead to some schools and colleges teaching only to that requirement, rather than continuing to cover the curriculum with their students until the end of term. We have been clear that teachers should continue teaching their students for as long as possible. Instead, we have been clear that teachers should ensure that their students have had reasonable coverage of the curriculum to support the grade awarded and enable progression and we trust teachers to make that judgement. Schools and colleges will use their professional judgements to determine whether the student has demonstrated reasonable coverage of the content, and where this is not the case, should discuss individual circumstances with students and their parents.

Regarding your concerns about parental pressure on teachers to amend grades, the JCQ guidance is clear that parents and pupils who try to influence or pressure teachers around grades should be recorded by centres. If this behaviour continues, centres should report these instances to the awarding organisations. [JCQ Suspected malpractice policies and procedures 2020-2021](#) also continue to apply this year.

## **The quality assurance process**

The JCQ guidance sets out this summer's approach to internal and external quality assurance.

Exam boards will speak to all centres to discuss their approach to assessment and quality assurance. Centres will be required to submit their policy to the exam boards, in which centres will need to explain how they plan to undertake internal standardisation of grades and how their teachers have access to training and support to ensure they take a consistent approach. Exam boards will review the policy summaries provided by the centre and, if they identify any concerns, examine the full centre policy. Where necessary they will contact the centre to discuss. Headteachers will also have to confirm to the exam boards that the requirements for quality assurance have been met at the time of submitting the grades for their centre by signing a head of centre declaration form.

The JCQ guidance sets out in detail what data should be considered and how centres should use their past performance data to support their own internal processes before they submit grades. Centres will not be expected to submit individual students' prior attainment data such as KS2 attainment. The guidance is clear that the past performance of a centre will not limit or determine a student's or a centre's overall outcomes, but instead should be used alongside a range of evidence to inform teachers' professional judgement on the level of attainment achieved by their students this year. If a centre's outcome vary significantly from previous years, the reasons for it should be considered and recorded so that it can be discussed with the awarding organisation during any external quality assurance checks. The guidance is clear that this expectation is in place to help make sure schools and colleges have not been overly lenient or harsh in their assessment of the 2021 cohort. It is the evidence of students' work that must form the basis for each student's grade and schools and colleges are not expected to use information from previous years to artificially suppress or raise grades.

With regard to your questions on the external quality assurance process, following the submission of grades, awarding organisations will sample the evidence supporting grades from some centres to determine if the grade awarded is a reasonable exercise of academic judgement. Awarding organisations will ask all centres to provide a selection of evidence. The selection of subjects and students will be determined by the awarding organisations who will then review either all of this or a proportion of this for selected centres. This will include both randomly selected centres and targeted centres where, for example, grades seem significantly lower or higher based on their past performance, or the awarding bodies had concerns about the centre arising from an earlier stage in the process. Data from the submission of grades on 18<sup>th</sup> June will be used to inform both which subjects and students the exam boards request evidence for and which centres are prioritised for targeted checks.

When developing our policy on alternative arrangements to exams this summer, we considered the role external assessors could play. To ensure qualifications are fair in assessing students only on what they have been taught, centres can draw on a range of evidence. This range means that qualifications cannot be moderated by external assessors in the way, for example, that non-examined assessments (NEA) can be in normal years. Instead, external assessors will be used to quality assure centre policies

and in the sampling of grades. As set out in the guidance, the quality assurance process is not designed to moderate grades but will support teachers to do what is needed and ensure centres adhere to the exam boards' requirements.

The quality assurance process is there to support teachers in ensuring internal quality assurance processes have been effectively implemented and will also reduce the risk of any malpractice. Parents and pupils can therefore have confidence in the grades awarded this summer.

### **Assessment materials and range of evidence**

As I have outlined above, there has been differential learning loss and therefore it is only fair that students are solely assessed on the content they have been taught. We are therefore clear that teachers need the flexibility to use a range of evidence to make a holistic judgement about each student, rather than relying on one standardised test. The JCQ guidance sets out the range of evidence teachers can use, including the optional use of questions provided by exam boards, mock exams, NEA coursework, or in-class tests set by the school which align closely with the awarding organisation's specification for the qualification.

The consultation asked if all students should complete externally set papers and the majority of respondents, including students and parents, did not support the use of these materials being mandatory. A mandatory assessment taken by all students could not accommodate students having been taught different areas of content and might not be possible for all students to complete in the context of the pandemic.

The exam boards have provided optional sets of questions (which include both previously and newly published material) to centres. These materials are not exams, but can be used by teachers to generate evidence to help determine a grade for each student. Teachers have the flexibility to choose questions and topics in line with what has been taught. Teachers and leaders supported the provision of such materials in the consultation to help them to fill gaps where evidence does not already exist or to validate a previous assessment. The use of the assessment materials is optional and just one element of the overall approach to gathering evidence.

In your letter you raised concerns about these additional assessment materials, including whether they should be published. We have been clear that these assessment materials are different in design and purpose from exams. They are able to be used in a classroom setting, and there is no specific, set window for administering these materials, allowing teachers as much flexibility as possible. Therefore, it is important that they are made openly available for all students to access at the same time, so as not to advantage or disadvantage individual students should they be leaked or shared informally. This approach was consulted on publicly, with 66% of respondents in support of releasing the materials in advance. The guidance published by JCQ will help teachers make the best use of these assessment materials in gathering evidence of their students' performance. Exam boards are publishing over 12,000 questions for AS/A level and over 12,000 questions for GCSE. This means there will be hundreds of questions and marks available for teachers to choose from for students taking typical combinations of GCSE or A level subjects. Students would demonstrate an incredibly high level of understanding of the

relevant subject areas to prepare and then learn their answers to this number of questions. It is only the sets of questions and mapping grids that will be published openly.

### **Special educational needs**

As with every cohort, some students this year will have reasonable adjustments or access arrangements that centres will need to accommodate. The exam boards will continue to provide advice, guidance and support to centres where needed including advice on modifying the sets of questions for students with additional needs as set out in JCQ's recent guidance.

Entitlements to reasonable adjustments should be taken into account by teachers when deciding which evidence to use, with flexibility to substitute or discount evidence or to make appropriate changes to the way in which pupils take an assessment yet to be sat. You asked whether students could insist on being able to take exam board provided papers, should they wish to do so. We have been clear that we place our trust fully in teachers to determine the best evidence, in line with exam board guidance, for students to demonstrate their knowledge. The department, Ofqual and the exam boards have also been clear that wherever possible the same evidence should be gathered for the whole class or cohort and the rationale for any exceptions should be documented. Teachers will choose evidence based on what students have been taught and the assessment objectives for a particular subject. Schools and colleges may choose to use the optional exam board-provided sets of questions, but students will not be able to insist on what evidence, of any type, is used. In exceptional circumstances, teachers can substitute or discount evidence where reasonable adjustments have not been applied so as to not prejudice the student's grade.

### **Preventing unconscious bias**

Awarding organisations will be providing assessment materials, guidance, and training to support centres to make fair, consistent, and evidence-based decisions which are without bias.

Ofqual's [equalities analysis](#) of the summer 2020 results for GCSE, AS and A levels concluded that, for GCSEs and A levels, there was no evidence that either the calculated grades or the final grades awarded last year were systematically biased against candidates who share particular protected characteristics or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Ofqual have published [information](#) for centres about making objective judgements this year. Centres will set out how they will ensure objectivity in their centre policies, which will be reviewed by exam boards. Schools, colleges, and exam boards will also undertake internal and external checks to help maximise fairness for students, no matter their background.

### **Appeals**

With regard to appeals, centres will be expected to allow students to see the evidence used to determine their grade in advance of that grade being submitted. This, along with the internal and external quality assurance processes and the guidance provided to teachers, should ensure students can have confidence in their grades which will reduce the number of instances in which students feel they need to appeal. We will continue to

work with awarding bodies to ensure they are prepared to respond to a range of scenarios in dealing with any appeals that arise.

You asked about the definition of a 'reasonable academic judgement'. Where a centre submits an appeal to an exam board, the exam board can review the evidence on which a student's grade was determined to confirm whether the grade submitted by the centre was a reasonable exercise of academic judgement. As set out in the JCQ guidance, a reasonable academic judgement is one that is supported by evidence; there may be difference of opinion without there being an unreasonable exercise of judgement. Ofqual are currently consulting on and will shortly be publishing further guidance to highlight the aspects of the process which are different this year from other years in their regulatory requirements for awarding organisations. Awarding organisations will provide training for those conducting appeals to support consistency. The JCQ guidance sets out that centres should ensure that evidence used to determine a student's grade, or records of marks awarded, should be retained where possible to support the appeals process.

Students should not be required to meet the cost of an appeal and we will provide funding to awarding organisations with respect to formal appeals of teacher assessed grades submitted to them by state-funded schools and colleges and any centres on behalf of private candidates. Centres will be expected to absorb the cost of the initial review.

### **Private candidates**

We are working with the sector to ensure there are enough centres available to support private candidates. Since your letter, JCQ have [published](#) a list of available centres giving any private candidates who still need it the opportunity to find a centre at a similar cost to a normal year. The exam boards are also committed to ensuring that private candidates will not be charged late fees if entries are received by 26 April. To support centres with the additional requirements of assessing private candidates this year, and to avoid the cost being passed on to candidates, we are providing a grant for centres to claim £200 per private candidate entry. The Government is encouraging all available exams centres to sign up to help these candidates achieve their qualifications in this exceptional year.

The department, JCQ, and Ofqual have also considered the needs of those who may not have a previous relationship with a school or college when it comes to assessment. The JCQ guidance includes a section for private candidates that takes into account their different circumstances. It provides information on how a centre can make use of pre-existing evidence from other established educational providers, such as distance learning providers which may not be exam centres themselves, and for when there is no pre-existing evidence. The guidance also explains that these candidates should have the same opportunity as other students to be assessed on the content they have studied and that centres can conduct assessments remotely if needed.

### **Exam board fees**

Awarding organisations will need to cover their costs, and we expect they will make commercial decisions on fees and refunds on that basis. Given the unusual circumstances this year it is not possible for them to have certainty about their 2021 costs in advance.

### **Helpline**

The Exam Results Helpline (ERH) delivered by the National Careers Service, will again be providing additional free careers support to young people, parents, and carers, following receipt of their exam results. This year it will open on 9 August for vocational, technical, and other general qualification exams, 10 August for A levels and 12 August for GCSEs: the contact number is 0800 100900. The ERH helpline will cover queries about students' results, along with providing direct contact to professional careers advisers who will help young people consider their options should they not receive the results they expected or help them consider different options or different careers.

The ERH will be the main route for students to access advice after receiving their results. Ofqual has also confirmed that their helpline will also be available prior to and following results days. The contact number is 0300 303 3344.

### **Future cohorts and learning loss**

We agree with the Committee that exams and other formal assessments remain the fairest way of assessing students. I can confirm therefore that it is the Government's policy that exams should go ahead in summer 2022 and that exams and assessments for vocational and technical qualifications should take place, in line with the latest PHE guidelines, throughout the 2021/22 academic year. We also remain committed to exams and other formal assessments in the longer term.

We recognise that students who will be taking exams and assessments next year have had significant disruption to their education this year, and that whilst we are committed to doing everything possible to keep schools and colleges open, we will continue to support students in the face of any further disruption. We have put in place a programme of support for students whose education has been disrupted, including making available £1.7bn in funding to support education recovery which will support pupils across early years settings, schools, and providers of 16-19 education. We are also considering with Ofqual, the awarding organisations and wider stakeholders what else we might need to do to ensure that students are able to sit exams and take other assessments safely and receive grades that are fair, even if further disruption does occur. This will of course, draw on lessons learnt during the pandemic. Although we remain committed to exams going ahead in 2021/22, we will continue to work with Ofqual on a range of contingencies, as we did for 2021.

We are also considering with Ofqual, which is responsible for the maintenance of standards, the questions which you raise about grading of qualifications in 2021/22 and beyond. We understand the need for to have certainty in order to plan for next year and will announce further details as soon as possible.

Finally, your letter asks about reference testing to understand learning loss. The Department is using all available evidence sources to understand the progress of children at all stages of their education. Alongside the National Reference Test, on which Ofqual has written to you separately, we will use results from statutory assessments to assess the level of learning loss. We will also continue to take advantage of commercial assessments that schools and colleges are already using to provide more insight on pupil attainment. On top of this we will work closely with organisations such as the EEF and the wider academic community. By using multiple data sources, we will build a nuanced

understanding that is representative of the pupil population, whilst being robust and accurate.

### **Conclusion**

We recognise that this continues to be a challenging time for teachers, leaders, and students due to the pandemic. The Secretary of State and I are hugely grateful to the school and college leaders, teachers and staff who have worked incredibly hard and continue to do so to meet their students' needs during this very difficult time.

The department will continue to work closely with the teaching unions, Ofqual, the exam boards and other key stakeholders to ensure that teachers are supported, and that students feel confident that they have been awarded a grade that demonstrates their ability and allows them to progress to the next stage of their careers.

I hope the above information answers your questions, and that the JCQ guidance and other materials published since your letter was sent reassure you on the processes that the department, Ofqual and AOs have put in place for 2021.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nick Gibb". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "N".

**Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
**Minister of State for School Standards**