



**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
Secretary of State

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**Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP**  
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I am writing to you following the first publication of this year's results data from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) and Ofqual. I would like to take this opportunity to inform you of the overall picture of results this year, along with the additional steps that the department, Ofqual and JCQ have taken to ensure that students and centres feel supported when they receive their results. Students can and should feel proud of their achievements, no matter the outcome.

I would firstly like to congratulate students for their amazing achievements this year. Despite the difficult circumstances caused by the pandemic, students have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience. As you will know, the decision not to hold exams this year was not taken lightly, and I would like to thank students and teachers, school and college leaders, and support staff for their hard work this year.

In the absence of exams, teachers were best placed to determine grades that reflect the hard work of their students. Teachers and schools and college leaders have done an excellent job in using their collective experience to assess students in 2021.

Students were at the centre of our considerations when forming policy decisions about alternative arrangements to exams this year, and I hope that they can have the confidence that Government, exam boards, schools, colleges, and universities are working together so that the grades students receive do what they have always done: act as a passport to students' next stage, whether that's college, sixth form, university, an apprenticeship or other work.

### **Results 2021**

As expected, the arrangements for awarding qualifications this year and the impact of the pandemic have meant that, overall, results look slightly different compared to previous years.

Students and parents can be confident in the grades they receive today, and later in the week on GCSE results day. Teachers were supported to assess their students, including through clear guidance and training published by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) and Ofqual. A robust quality assurance process was put in place, with internal and external checks to make sure grades were awarded as fairly as possible.

As Nick Gibb confirmed at his appearance with you on 9 March, the department and Ofqual expected some upward pressure on grading this year, but the standards that have been measured against have not changed. Given the uncertain path of the pandemic and different levels of disruption experienced, teachers were given the flexibility to draw from a range of evidence to support their judgements and only assess students on what they had been taught. Teachers were best placed to make professional judgements on individual cases, including in cases where students were on the border of two grades. For those achieving the highest A Level grades, they are our most capable and independent students and may have been felt the disruption to learning less keenly.

Overall, 88.4% of A level grades awarded this year are A\* to C. This is compared to 87.8% in 2020.

Regarding the number of top grades awarded this year, 19.0% per cent of entries are at grade A\*, with 44.3% at grade A or above. This is up 4.6% and 6.0% on 2020 respectively. However, this is lower than the uplift seen between 2019 and 2020, where the proportion of A\* grades increased by 6.6% and grades awarded at A or above increased by 12.7%.

The pattern of results for vocational and technical qualifications across all types of VTQ has stayed broadly the same for all levels, with no meaningful changes in the award of top grades compared to 2020. Though there is some variability in different qualification types, this is within normal patterns and more pronounced with small cohorts (where cohort variation has a larger effect).

### **Quality Assurance**

You previously asked about the external quality assurance processes in place for this year and the level of sampling that would take place. It was important that the quality assurance process was robust yet proportionate, supporting teachers to make their judgements and ensuring that students received meaningful grades.

All centres were covered by the QA process. All heads of centres had to submit a formal declaration about the accuracy and integrity of grades and the processes supporting them at the time of submitting grades. All centres have had their process for awarding grades checked by exam boards to make sure their arrangements are appropriate and fair for all students. All centres submitted supporting evidence of their students' work to the exam boards.

Evidence from 1101 centres in England, around 1 in 5 schools and colleges, was selected for scrutiny. These centres were identified through a combination of a random sample and targeted checks where, for example, grades seemed significantly lower or higher based on their past performance, or the exam boards had concerns about potential malpractice.

For 85% of the schools and colleges whose students' work was scrutinised by the exam boards, their subject experts were satisfied that the evidence supported the TAGs that had been submitted.

This demonstrated the extent to which teachers took the process of awarding grades seriously and followed the guidance and training provided. Teachers were asked to make holistic judgements so changes should only have been where the evidence could not support the grade.

The remainder were subject to further scrutiny. Where exam boards were not satisfied they followed up with the schools and colleges concerned. As part of these discussions, exam board subject experts held professional conversations with centres about their judgements and offered them an opportunity to explain their decisions. In some cases centres were asked to reconsider or resubmit grades.

For VTQs, each Awarding Organisation has put its own quality assurance system in place to make sure that grades awarded across the system can command confidence. VTQ assessment takes place throughout the year and VTQ awarding organisations have longstanding processes for quality assuring these results.

Ofqual set requirements for Quality Assurance and required awarding organisations to confirm that effective arrangements were in place, which met these requirements.

This included ensuring centres had effective arrangements in place to quality assure their TAGs before submitting them. Awarding organisations provided guidance to centres on the range of evidence that could be considered in the judgement of a TAG. They advised on the process teachers and tutors should follow when determining TAGs and how to ensure that decisions are consistent. Teachers or tutors made informed judgements about their learners' performance using a variety of evidence. These judgements were quality assured within centres, and then by the relevant awarding organisation

## **Equalities Data**

Regarding A level outcomes for 18 year olds, overall for every measure in Ofqual's equalities analysis (mean grade, grade A and above, and grade C and above), all groups have seen an improvement in their outcomes this year compared to 2019 and almost all groups have seen an improvement in their outcomes compared to 2020. There has been general stability in the patterns in differences in outcomes for students with protected characteristics compared to 2019 and, in particular, 2020. Exam boards found no evidence that teachers' judgements were systemically biased in favour of one group of students or another.

Ofqual have published a full equalities analysis on A level outcomes which can be accessed [here](#). Further analysis on GCSE data will be published on 12 August.

The VTQ cohort can be highly variable year on year. In the majority of cases, we found no notable changes over time in probability of achieving top grades between different groups of learners. We expect a degree of change in any given year, and the majority of results are in line with those expectations. However, it does appear that the male/female attainment gap increased in 2021 for Level 1/2 Other General qualifications, and for Level 3 Applied General and other Performance Table qualifications, with males increasingly less likely to achieve top grades compared to females.

### **Record number of Higher Education Students**

A record number of students are expected to progress to university this year, taking the next steps in their lives towards securing exciting and rewarding careers after an extraordinary and challenging period. Students and staff have worked tremendously hard in the last year in these unprecedented circumstances.

This year, we have seen more applications to certain courses, particularly medicine and dentistry, meeting the terms of their offer. As in previous years, the Government has worked closely with the higher education sector ahead of results day to ensure as many students as possible can progress to Higher Education if they get the grades they need.

On 5 August the Government announced that medical and dentistry schools across England will get additional funding to expand courses for the 2021/22 academic year. Caps on medical and dentistry places have been adjusted so that more students than ever will have the opportunity to study on these courses in 2021/22, and in the long-term help boost our future NHS workforce.

The Minister for Universities, Michelle Donelan MP, has also worked with UCAS, the Office for Students and medical and dental school partners to ensure there is a system that matches students to unfulfilled places at medical and dental schools with space.

In anticipation of a greater interest in places this year on popular courses that are key to the country's recovery from the pandemic, we have provided up to £10 million in additional grant funding to universities through the Office for Students to help them to increase capacity in medical, dentistry, nursing, STEM and other high-cost subjects.

### **Choices for Students**

The last 18 months have been uniquely challenging for students, as their education has been disrupted by the pandemic. We have put in place a range of measures to ensure that students this year have access to more choices than ever before. Where a student is disappointed with their results, we have encouraged them to talk to their school, college or prospective university to discuss available options, which include autumn exams, Post 16 and 18 technical options, including Traineeships, T Levels, Apprenticeships, Kickstart and Higher Technical Qualifications.

As is the case every year, some students looking to enter Higher Education may have narrowly missed out on the grades their preferred provider has asked for. Even if students don't get the grades they need, their preferred university may still offer them a place. Also, just as they do in any normal year, UCAS will be helping thousands of students to find places through Clearing if they need or choose to explore other options once they've received their grades. Last year 83,000 students secured places through Clearing and it is an excellent pathway for students to explore their options.

While Higher Education opens many doors for those who study at this level, it is by no means the right option for everyone, including those with the highest grades. There are lots of choices out there for students to get where they want to go. I encourage students to look at the range of choices available on the National Careers Service website or through UCAS's Clearing, Clearing Plus or Career Finder tool for apprenticeship opportunities.

Ofqual wrote to you on 22 July with additional details on arrangements for appeals. This year, there will also be a fair and accessible appeals system in place for students who believe there has been an error in their grade. The department and Ofqual have always been clear that the appeals system is there to correct errors not identified during earlier parts of the process. A student's grade can go up, stay the same or go down on appeal and students should therefore consider carefully if appealing is the right course of action for them and only submit an appeal if they believe an error has been made. JCQ have now published their student guide to appeals, which can be found here: <https://www.jcq.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/JCQ-Student-Appeals-Guide-2021.pdf>

I want to ensure that students have as many opportunities to progress as possible. This includes allowing for students who may wish to improve their teacher assessed grade to sit an exam in 2021. Ofqual has therefore confirmed that in the Autumn, students will be able to enter exams in all GCSE and A level subjects and maths and science AS level subjects. The autumn series exams is open to any student who receives a teacher-assessed grade (TAG) this summer, or who an exam board reasonably believes would have entered the summer 2021 exams in the subject, had they taken place, including private candidates.

The government is also providing additional funding this year for those year 13 students who have been most severely impacted by the pandemic to repeat a term or year of their studies. This will be in exceptional circumstances and students should discuss with their school or college whether this would be the best option for them.

As I confirmed to you in my letter of 27 April, the National Careers Service is again offering practical support and advice to help students decide what to do next. Students who don't get the grades they expect can, as always, contact the helpline for advice about what's next and for further wellbeing and mental health support. The contact number is 0800 100900.

## **Future Cohorts**

As I wrote to you in my letter of 12 July, it remains the government's firm policy position that exams and other formal assessments are the fairest way of assessing students, and that it is in the best interests of students for exams to return to normal as soon as possible. It is our firm intention that exams and assessments should return to normal in academic year 2022/23.

However, we understand that students who will be entering qualifications in 2021/22 will have had disruption to their education over the last 16 months which may affect their preparedness for exams and assessments despite the package of education recovery measures we have put in place. Whilst we believe it is in students' interests that they cover as much of the curriculum as possible, we also recognise that in order to be fair, exams and assessments in 2022 will need to be adapted to take this disruption into account. A joint consultation by the Department for Education and Ofqual was launched on 12 July, seeking views on the proposed changes to exams in summer 2022 in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students entering these qualifications. The consultation closed on 1 August, and decisions will be announced early in the autumn term.

A separate consultation was conducted by DfE and Ofqual on arrangements for awarding Vocational and Technical qualifications in 2021/22, the response to which was published on 6 August.

In deciding on an approach to grading next year we will be asking Ofqual to be as fair as possible to students taking qualifications next summer and to those who took them in previous years, or will take them in the future. We recognise the need to give certainty to students, teachers and organisations that rely on qualifications as soon as possible, and Ofqual will be giving a clear indication of that grading system in the autumn term.

I look forward to appearing before the committee again in early September to discuss this year's results in detail. Please don't hesitate to write to me with any questions you may have prior to my appearance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large 'G' followed by a 'W' and a 'C', with a horizontal line at the end.

**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
**Secretary of State for Education**