



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

16 September 2021

Dear Mr Halfon

I am writing to you following my recent appearance before the Committee on 7 September to provide some information on a number of points discussed during the session.

Engagement with employers

The Committee asked for more information about our engagement with employers this year. As we explained in the session, we have recently sought the views of organisations representing employers about the grading of general qualifications in 2022 and beyond, and prior to that sought their views on the arrangements in place for this year. This forms part of ongoing work to seek employers' views as users of the qualifications we regulate, including through representative bodies and other targeted engagement.

Employers' views on awarding in 2021

In January 2021 we consulted jointly with DfE on how [GCSE, AS and A level](#) grades should be awarded in summer 2021, and on alternative arrangements for the award of [VTQ and other general qualifications](#). We received over 100,000 responses from a range of organisations and individuals, with the highest volumes of responses from students, parents and carers, and teachers.

Of the employers who responded to the consultation on awarding of GCSE, AS and A level grades in 2021, 94% strongly agreed that the grades awarded to students in 2021 should reflect the standard at which they were performing. 88% agreed that teachers should be able to use evidence of the standard of a student's performance from throughout their course.

VTQ consultation responses were reported differently, reflecting the different number of responses. Employers' views varied, with indications that these were informed by the needs of their companies and industries and the impact of Covid 19. Employers appreciated that adaptations needed to be made to

qualifications but were clear that they needed to know that job applicants had fully achieved their qualifications so that they can be relied on to reflect a student's ability.

We also spoke with five representative employer organisations during the 2021 consultation period. We heard that, in general, their members were focused on dealing with the direct impact of the pandemic on their businesses – meaning that engagement with issues regarding qualifications was not a high priority for many. However, they did tell us that where changes were made, businesses wanted clarity on what they meant so they could understand the implications for their recruitment processes. We were also told that employers wanted assurance that qualifications would be awarded consistently regardless of the situation and region in which they were taken.

We also met employer organisations in August to discuss their initial reactions to 2021 results. The employer organisations reported that they had not heard concerns from their members about the way grades had been awarded. They also noted that employers often supplement the information they get from qualification grades with other information about candidate performance when making recruitment decisions.

Employer views on grading in 2022 and beyond

As we discussed in the hearing, we presented to employer organisations possible options we are considering for grading in 2022 and beyond and invited their views. There was not a clear consensus on the action we should take. There was some support for returning to 2019 grading outcomes straightaway but also views that, depending on the way in which the pandemic pans out, it might be better to implement a staged return to 2019 outcomes, or to consider changes to the grading scale. All of them highlighted the importance of clear communication to employers on this issue, particularly about any implications for students' competence and their ability to perform tasks.

Survey

I also mentioned a survey that Ofqual has commissioned to help us better understand public sentiment in relation to regulated qualifications. Phases of this survey took place in March, May and July 2021 and over 1300 employers responded across the three phases. The employers taking part in the survey comprise of senior or middle managers whose organisation has recruited young people (aged 16-25) in the 12 months prior, and are representative of businesses in England by size, sector, industry and region. We will publish the findings from the work once the fourth and final phase of the survey, which is already underway, is complete. We will send this publication to the Committee.

In addition, the Committee may be interested in our annual perceptions surveys, which report on perceptions of [GCSE, AS and A level, and Applied General qualifications](#) and [Vocational and Technical Qualifications](#) in England, and track perceptions of these qualifications from a range of groups, including employers.

The range of engagement and research carried out by Ofqual with employers reflects our commitment to understanding and carefully considering their views in the decisions we take.

Ofqual's equalities analyses: students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

During the hearing we highlighted Ofqual's [equalities analysis](#) on GCSE and A level results in 2021 and the Committee wished to see more information about outcomes for students with SEND. The equalities report considers whether the gaps between the average results of different groups of students, which are observed in normal years, have changed this summer. This included a consideration of gender, ethnicity, free school meal eligibility, English as an additional language, socioeconomic status and special educational needs and disability (SEND). The report compares the extent to which the relationship between results and student background variables in 2019 and 2020 are similar in the 2021 outcomes. In doing so, our model takes account of the prior attainment of the students as well as other factors.

At A level, the analyses show general stability in the differences in outcomes for students with different protected characteristics compared to 2019 and 2020. There are some, small, relative changes in overall outcomes. Our model suggests that in 2019, students with SEND received slightly higher grades than students with no SEND when we control for prior attainment at GCSE. In 2021, this has reversed with students with no SEND receiving slightly higher grades on average than those with SEND when we control for prior attainment. The change is a tenth of a grade. This analysis found no change between 2020 and 2021 in the relative outcomes of students with SEND and those with no SEND. In the raw data, that is, without controlling for prior attainment, students with SEND have historically performed lower than students with no SEND.

Again at GCSE, the analyses show general stability in the differences in outcomes for students with different protected characteristics compared to 2019 and 2020, when we control for prior attainment at Key Stage 2. At GCSE, at grade 7 and above, the analyses found that the longstanding gaps indicating lower outcomes of students with SEND relative to those with no SEND widened by 2 percentage points from 2019 to 2021, when we control for prior attainment. The analysis showed no change at grade 4 or for mean grade at GCSE.

Further information, including details of the methodology and detailed findings, can be found in the full report.

Release of data

We also discussed the release of Ofqual data from 2020 as previously raised by the Committee. At the hearing in March I committed to making this one of my priorities. As explained to the Committee, legal complexities meant that it was not possible to make the data available as quickly as we would have liked. We are pleased that it is now available.

On 29 July, Ofqual published [two research reports](#) based on the data that would be made available to external researchers. On 6 August we issued a [press release](#) confirming that data sharing agreements had been reached. On 16 August the data was added to the Office for National Statistics (ONS)

Secure Research Service (SRS) Data Catalogue¹ and accredited researchers were able to apply to access it. ONS communicated this message in its newsletter sent to all its accredited researchers on 18 August. Ofqual also updated the Committee on this matter by email on 24 August.

You asked about the data from 2021 summer results. We are committed to sharing this as early as possible. We need appeals against results to be completed to give us a definitive dataset for this year's results. At this stage we do not know precisely when appeals will be completed, but based on anticipated timescales for this, updating data sharing agreements and transferring the data, we expect this to be in spring of next year.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'S' followed by a wavy line.

Simon Lebus

Interim Chief Regulator, Ofqual

¹ Office of National Statistics Accessing secure research data