



Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee
House of Commons
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Dear Robert,

I am writing to provide an update on decisions made by the Department and Ofqual with regard to exams in 2022. I hope that the announcements shortly being made by the Department and Ofqual will provide clarity and confidence that despite the disruption they have faced, students taking exams and assessments in 2022 will be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and progress successfully to the next stage of their lives.

The Department and Ofqual will be publishing our [consultation decision document](#), outlining the decisions taken by the Department and Ofqual following analysis of responses to the consultation on [changes to the assessment of GCSE, AS and A level in 2022](#). The consultation closed on 1 August and received 6725 responses, with almost a quarter of these from students. The Department and Ofqual have also engaged widely with sector representatives, and I know that, following their appearance before the committee with DfE earlier this month, Ofqual has written to you separately with some additional detail on our continued engagement with businesses and the employment sector in the past year.

Ofqual will also set out its approach to grading, confirming that 2022 will be a transition year to reflect that we are in a pandemic recovery period and students taking exams in 2022 have experienced disruption to their education. It has therefore set out its plans for a mid-point between 2021 and 2019 grades in 2022. In 2023, Ofqual plans to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years.

While it is our firm intention that exams will go ahead next year, supported by the permitted adaptations, we understand that contingency arrangements are also needed to deal with

the unlikely event that exams cannot go ahead fairly or safely. Ofqual and the Department plan for Teacher Assessed Grades to be used in the event exams cannot take place, and together with Ofqual we have launched a [consultation](#) on improvements to the 2021 process and confirmed the contingency arrangements that will apply to vocational and technical qualifications.

Adaptations to GCSE, AS and A levels

As you will be aware, the government has been clear that, all other things being equal, exams and other formal assessments remain 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. However, we recognise that those students taking exams in 2022 have had considerable disruption to their education and, together with Ofqual, we have consulted on a range of adaptations to exams to take account of that.

The proposals set out in the consultation on adaptations to GCSE, AS and A level exams received a high degree of support, and I can therefore confirm that we are going ahead with the package of adaptations set out in the consultation. This includes four elements:

1. Choice of topics in GCSE English literature, history, ancient history, and choice of content in GCSE geography;
2. The provision of advance information on the focus of content of exams in those subjects at GCSE, AS and A level where there is no choice of topic or content;
3. Changes to the requirements for the delivery of practical activities in science subjects, and assessment in art and design; and
4. The provision of support materials in the exam in GCSE maths, physics and combined science.

I can confirm that the Department's intention is for advance information to be published by exam boards by 7 February 2022 at the latest to support student revision. There will be flexibility to deploy advance information at an earlier point if there is significant further disruption to education.

Adaptations to VTQs

In July 2021, the Department and Ofqual consulted together on arrangements for the assessment and awarding of Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications for 2021 to 2022. The [response to this consultation](#) was published on 6 August.

The response confirmed the government's intention that exams and assessments will go ahead in 2021/2022 and that all content should be

taught as far as feasible to support students to progress. However, recognising the disruption to their education that many students have faced, we outlined the scope of the adaptations that may be necessary to maximise teaching time and support students to take their exams and demonstrate their progress fairly.

Depending on the purpose of the qualification, adaptations may include, but are not limited to:

- A reduction in number of internal assessments, whilst ensuring all content is taught;
- A reduction of hours of work experience or work placement
- Longer and more assessment windows;
- Social distancing adaptations (for example, professional discussion in place of certain practical activities); and
- Greater flexibility in invigilation rules (for example, to allow subject teachers to invigilate their own subject).

I believe that these adaptations should be sufficient to ensure that exams and other assessments can take place fairly in 2021/2022 and that taken as a whole, this package of measures will help to mitigate the disruption to students' education and reduce pressures on students and teachers in the coming year.

These changes to both GCSEs and A/AS levels and vocational and technical qualifications will be for one year only and it is the government's firm intention that exams and assessments will return to normal in the academic year 2022/23. Whilst the path of the pandemic remains unpredictable, there is a good chance that students will be able to make real progress over the coming year. The determination of teachers to help them progress is combined with the government investing over £3 billion in a package of measures to support education recovery, including tutoring, summer schools and mental health support, as well as further training and development for teachers. This package sits alongside the ongoing successful rollout of the vaccination programme, which has now been extended to 12-15 year olds, the ending of self-isolation requirements for school bubbles and significant improvements in the ability of schools and colleges to deliver remote education where necessary.

Grading

The grading of GCSEs, AS and A levels is a decision for Ofqual as the independent regulator of qualifications. Ofqual has statutory objectives to maintain standards and promote public confidence in exams and qualifications. Ofqual has confirmed that 2022 will be a transition year for grading and has set out its plans for a mid-point between 2021 and 2019 grades. This reflects that we are in a pandemic recovery period and students taking exams in 2022 have experienced disruption to their education. In 2023, Ofqual plans to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years

The decision on the approach to grading GCSEs and A levels will have an impact on certain vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) used for similar purposes, including progressing to further study. Ofqual's regulatory framework requires awarding organisations to secure, as far as it is possible, that VTQ learners are not disadvantaged nor advantaged compared with their GCSE and A level peers. I understand that Ofqual has written separately to the Committee to inform them of this decision.

I believe that taken as a whole, this package of measures will help to mitigate the disruption to students' education and reduce pressures on students and teachers in the coming year. Fairness for young people has been at the very heart of every decision the Government has taken on exams and qualifications over the past 18 months and this is a principle the Department will continue as we move towards returning to normal in 2022/23.

Results Days

I am also pleased to confirm that this year, as we return to exams, we will also return to the normal timing of results days, on 18 August for AS/A level, and 25 August for GCSEs. I can also confirm that results for Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) most similar to GCSEs and A levels that are used for progression should be awarded on or before GCSE and A level results day. Other types of qualifications, such as Functional Skills Qualifications, and those that are not tied to an academic year, will continue to be awarded throughout the year.

Contingencies

The Department and Ofqual remain firmly committed to exams going ahead in 2022 and beyond. We recognise, however, that while the path of the pandemic remains unpredictable, it is important to provide the sector with clarity on our plans for the unlikely event that exams cannot be held in a way which is safe and fair in 2022.

Following extensive engagement with the sector, we propose that the plans would be based on Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) with improvements to reduce the workload for teachers and ensure that the experience of preparing evidence for such an eventuality also helps students prepare for the most likely scenario of a return to exams.

We are proposing:

1. clearer guidance on the evidence on which TAGs would be based which aims to enable teachers to collect evidence at points in the year that work best for them and their students;
2. that any cancellation of exams and use of TAGs must be at a national level;

3. a quality assurance system with exam boards requiring schools and colleges to set out in a policy their approach to determining, quality assuring and submitting TAGs; and
4. that an appeals process would be put in place, similar to the arrangements which applied in 2021.

[The consultation](#) opens on the 30 September and will close at 23:45 on 13 October.

We will also publish our contingency plans for VTQs, which seek to achieve parity and consistency where relevant with the arrangements proposed for GCSEs and AS/A levels. These include that:

- for VTQs most similar to GCSEs and AS/A levels, qualifications would be awarded using TAGs; and
- VTQs that require students to demonstrate occupational/professional competence would need to be delayed rather than awarded using a TAG, in order to ensure that students are able to demonstrate the full set of knowledge and skills required.

The diversity of the VTQ landscape means that a one-size-fits-all approach is not applicable or desirable. As such, responsibility for setting out the requirements for TAGs rests with awarding organisations. Ofqual will continue to work with awarding organisations to ensure that teachers and institutions are prepared and equipped to offer TAGs in the most effective and efficient way, should they ever be needed.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued engagement on this matter, and I look forward to working with you and the Committee on these important matters.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'N. Zahawi', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education