



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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ARRANGEMENTS FOR EXAMINATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS IN 2020/21

The education sector and the whole country have faced unprecedented challenges in dealing with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic over the last few months. In response to my directions of 31 March and 9 April 2020, I know that Ofqual has been working at pace to put in place arrangements for students to receive calculated grades for the cancelled GCSE, AS, A level examinations this summer, and calculated grades and adapted assessments for vocational, technical and other qualifications. This unprecedented course of action was taken to allow students who would have been taking their exams and other assessments this summer to progress to further study or employment. I am very grateful for your efforts and those of awarding organisations to deliver these exceptional arrangements.

I am determined to do everything possible to ensure that no student is prevented from fulfilling their potential by the pandemic. I have asked my Department to put into place support for students at all phases of their education and to work with the sector towards a full return to school and college in September. My priority is that these efforts should mitigate the effects of time lost for education as far as possible, with special emphasis on the needs of disadvantaged pupils and students. This is especially important for students currently in the year before their key exams and assessments, who have limited time available to them to complete their courses. I will be announcing further details before the end of term.

Despite our best efforts, however, it remains possible that some students will not have covered elements of their course at all, or in the depth usually expected, by the time they are due to take their exams and assessments next summer. I am very aware that this creates further challenges in the coming year in relation to the 2020/21 exam series. All students due to sit exams next year will have experienced some disruption to their education due to the current public health situation, and the extent of this will vary significantly. Many will have experienced distress and hardship. At this point we cannot have a complete picture of the scale of the disruption or what the effects will be on education provision over the coming academic year.

It is the Government's policy that exams and other assessments should nevertheless go ahead in the next academic year, because exams are the best and fairest form of assessment. Teachers therefore need to be able to plan for coverage of the exam syllabus and assessment content next academic year, leading up to exams in the summer of 2021, or other assessments throughout the year. It is for this reason that I am writing to you again now. The purpose of this letter is to set out my Department's broad policy objectives in relation to exams and assessments next year. I would welcome advice and proposals from Ofqual in light of those policy objectives.

As with this year, the most important principle is that students due to sit exams and assessments in the next academic year should be enabled to progress successfully to the next stage of education or employment. A second important principle is that every effort should be made to maintain the standards and rigour of the qualifications, to the extent that this is possible given the unique circumstances. In addition, I know you will continue to give careful consideration to students' wellbeing, and will want to look particularly carefully at the impact of your proposals on disadvantaged students, students with SEND and those with particular protected characteristics.

On the General Qualifications side, A levels and – to a lesser extent – AS levels are important for successful transition to higher and further education and it is important that, where possible, assessment of the key elements of content for progression is retained. For GCSEs, a key consideration should be the essential elements for successful progression on to A levels or other level 3 qualifications. I recognise that the approaches you take may differ by qualification and by subject.

Schools and colleges will to date have taught the elements of their chosen GCSE, AS and A level courses in the order that best suits them. This means we cannot suppose commonality in coverage across all centres. Each of the elements of content is important and to change the scope of content for one year would, I believe, send the wrong signals for subsequent years. For these reasons, I am not minded to specify changes to the DfE content that forms the foundation for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications. I would welcome, instead, advice from Ofqual on potential adaptations in assessments to respond to this context, including a pragmatic use of content sampling and increasing optionality within papers to give students more choice. In considering any advice on adaptations I would like you to bear in mind the importance of the

key core elements for each subject and also to consider how any changes would be put into effect fairly and consistently by all exam boards. I would welcome further dialogue with you on the details of your plans for these qualifications in the coming weeks.

I know that you will also be considering how best to protect the 2021 cohort of students through your approach to grading next year – for example by using similar methods to those used when introducing new exams, to ensure that outcomes next year are similar to those of recent years. I recognise that it is too early to determine what the potential impact on performance will be, and I await your advice on that in the coming months. If necessary I will issue a further Direction on this issue under section 129(6) of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009.

I would also like Ofqual to explore with awarding organisations the scope for altering the timing of exams next year, including moving some or all exams to later in the summer term. This is with the intention of allowing more teaching time, especially for the highest volume subjects. I understand that the scope for this may be limited, especially for the qualifications used for progression to further and higher education.

I recognise that the vocational and technical qualifications (VTQ) landscape is complex, with greater diversity of content and assessment type, delivery, timing and providers. I would welcome advice and proposals from you on the measures that you and awarding organisations can take in relation to VTQs, to mitigate the impact of disruption in vocational and technical education in line with the policy objectives set out above. In particular, I would welcome your views on arrangements to ensure that there is consistency between the approaches awarding organisations take to similar VTQs and that students and adult learners taking VTQs are not advantaged or disadvantaged as against their peers taking General Qualifications, particularly where they are competing for similar progression opportunities.

I know that you have been liaising with the regulators in the devolved administrations on the arrangements for 2020 and ask that you continue this for 2021.

I am copying this letter to: Roger Taylor, Chair of Ofqual; Robert Halfon MP as chair of the Education Select Committee; and to Kirsty Williams MS, Peter Weir MLA, and John Swinney MSP as education ministers in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland respectively.



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Secretary of State for Education