



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Dame Glenys Stacey
Interim Chief Regulator
Ofqual

12 October 2020

Dear Dame Glenys,

I am writing to thank you for all that you and Ofqual are doing to prepare for the safe delivery of exams in 2021, in these most challenging of circumstances.

Students have been working hard towards their examinations and today I announced the government's commitment to ensuring that GCSE, AS and A level exams go ahead. They deserve to benefit from the fairest form of assessment – examination – as embodied in regulated qualifications, and they need to be able to be certain that this is the way they will be assessed. In this way, they are able progress securely to the next stage of their lives.

I appreciate, however, that this is particularly challenging this year. I am determined to ensure no student is prevented from fulfilling their potential because of this pandemic. The government is absolutely committed to keeping schools open, and I will continue to do everything I can to mitigate the impact of disruption on students' education, and to plan for all eventualities.

I announced today that we will delay the start of the examination series next year, to allow for more teaching and learning. My department will work with Ofqual and the exam boards in partnership to ensure delivery to the proposed new timetable.

Delaying the start of the examination season allows for additional teaching and learning time to students, schools and colleges. As you know, we have in place other initiatives to support schools and colleges, as they strive to help students catch up on lost learning.

This is in addition to the freeing up of teaching time, enabled by the changes already agreed to what will be assessed in some GCSE subjects, as well as changes that ease the burden of assessment in some subjects at GCSE, AS and A level. These changes were announced in August, following consultation, and it is important now that teachers and students are clear that specifications are settled.

I would be grateful, however, for your advice on whether any further steps should be considered to ensure the assessment experience is as fair and accessible for all students as possible, while still producing sufficiently valid and reliable results in these key qualifications.

It is critical that we plan for all foreseeable scenarios to safeguard students' ability to sit exams.

Both my department and Ofqual have a role to play in the arrangements that will need to be put in place. It is important that we engage widely and openly with the education sector in the next six weeks to consider the measures necessary to address potential disruption to 2021 exams. This engagement will need to include gaining views from students, those organisations representing teachers, schools and colleges, and exam boards, as well as the further and higher education sectors.

My officials are already working with you and the exam boards to consider the risks to delivery of the 2021 exams at a national, local and individual student level. At an individual level, a student may not be able to sit an exam or exams due to illness, shielding, bereavement or self-isolation. Individual schools, or schools and colleges within a locality may be adversely affected by the pandemic during the examination season in ways that put exams for students in those centres at risk.

The work here will need to identify all the potential scenarios, and it will be important to evaluate the risks and possible unintended consequences of each of the contingencies we consider.

The priority now is to ensure that students have confidence that they will be fairly treated in terms of assessment in 2021. It will be particularly important to consider disadvantaged students and children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; the impacts on student wellbeing; public confidence; and scalability (to reflect different levels of disruption and the workload burdens on teachers and school and college leaders). It is vital, of course, that we maintain the validity of qualifications as far as possible.

I'm pleased that with my department's support you are able to deliver on these plans in the best interest of all students. We should aim to inform the sector of the conclusions of the contingency planning in November.

I look forward to continuing to work closely with you and exam boards on this.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education