



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
LONDON
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13 November 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Further to my letter to you of 5 November, I am writing to detail the work we are doing to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on other regulated qualifications beyond GCSE, AS and A levels.

As you know, there is a wide range of vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications, some of which are used alongside or instead of GCSE, AS and A levels, to facilitate progression into further or higher education, and into and through employment. Last year over 5m were awarded. Building on our approach in the summer, we are regulating the providers of these important qualifications in novel ways, in response to the pandemic.

Our Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework (ERF) gives awarding organisations unprecedented flexibility to adapt their qualifications so as to free up time for teaching and learning and mitigate the effect of disruptions to teaching, learning and assessment. Awarding organisations are responding by making assessments as manageable and flexible as possible, to address the impact of compliance with social distancing or other public health guidance and to safeguard against disruption because of lockdowns or closure of facilities.

As in normal times, it is for awarding organisations to decide the best action to take in relation to their own qualifications, but the new framework gives them important guiderails and limits to work to – so that results remain sufficiently valid and reliable, despite such trying circumstances. As we have made clear at every stage of our response to the pandemic, fairness for learners is a key priority. We require that learners should not be disadvantaged or advantaged compared with their peers taking GCSEs, AS and A levels.

Approaches will vary, given the range of qualification structures, assessment methodologies and the different contexts for learners. To give a flavour, some awarding organisations have elected to move the timetable for summer external assessments; others are drawing more heavily on online assessment. Some are changing assessment tasks to accommodate social distancing requirements and reduced access to clients, and others are using witness testimony from professionals in their industry as an alternative to live observation.

We believe these regulatory freedoms are necessary, but rest assured, we are acting purposefully to promote consistency between similar qualifications. We know this will be

helpful to colleges and schools, and we are supporting and facilitating collaborative working between awarding organisations and the sector, with this in mind.

We are monitoring the changes being made, and working alongside your officials in DfE, who are considering them from the perspective of their compliance with Performance Table rules. And we are also working closely on the immediate matter of apprentices' Functional Skills assessments. I will write to you separately on this.

We are conscious that schools, colleges and training providers need clarity, especially because many VTQ assessments are spaced throughout the year. We asked awarding organisations to start to communicate their plans as from 23rd October. I am pleased that AoC, AELP and Holec report to us that these communications are reaching the sector and we hear too that there is constructive engagement on flexibilities.

Novel regulation aside, we are also using more established risk-based and proportionate approaches. We are monitoring closely those awarding organisations offering high stakes or high volume qualifications – focussing on their operating models, capacity, qualification adaptations and the safe delivery of their specific qualification suites, including their approaches to standard setting. And across all awarding organisations we are taking a proportionate approach to regulation, focussing on particular qualifications, sectors and awarding organisations' management of systemic risks.

Despite all this, providers are finding the delivery of qualifications programmes difficult. A student's development of practical skills often requires specialist equipment, meaning remote delivery is inappropriate, and assessment of practical skills can take a lot of time. Training in these subjects is regularly delivered by specialist vocational teachers and they can be particularly hard to source, even in normal times. In short, there are particular challenges over and above those faced in general qualifications.

In order to respond to these challenges, it seems likely that awarding organisations will need to make further adaptations, and certainly we are encouraging them to consider the full range of possible contingency scenarios that might be needed.

We will continue to monitor progress and listen to providers and will keep the approach under review. If necessary we will guide and support awarding organisations to make further adaptations in a way that strikes the right balance between flexibility and validity.

Finally, at the time of my appointment, you noted that a priority for this autumn was for Ofqual to successfully take up its new responsibilities for the external quality assurance (EQA) of apprenticeship end-point assessment. I am pleased to report that we are doing that, and on November 12th just under 70 standards transferred to us for their quality assurance, from the Institute. This is good news for apprentices, and I am confident that the plans we, the Institute and ESFA have in place will continue this safe transfer of responsibilities.

I will keep you updated as the situation develops.

Yours sincerely



Dame Glenys Stacey
Acting Chief Regulator