



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

Secretary of State

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Dame Glenys Stacey
Interim Chief Regulator
Ofqual

2 December 2020

Dear Dame Glenys

On 12 October, I wrote to you confirming this government's commitment to ensuring that GCSE, AS and A level exams can go ahead next summer, and to thank Ofqual for all it is doing to prepare for those exams in challenging circumstances.

Holding a successful exams series in summer 2021 remains a vital component of our strategy to maintain continuity of education, support our young people to experience the best possible education during these difficult times, and to progress with good qualifications, fairly awarded. Mindful of our distinct responsibilities, we must continue to work together to support students in progressing securely to the next stage of their lives whilst also taking into account the challenges they and their teachers have and continue to face.

I know from our discussions and correspondence that you remain supportive of our commitment to exams. Thank you also for your collaborative work with department officials to engage with sector stakeholders (including unions, heads, exam boards, HE and FE bodies) along with students, parents, and equalities organisations to ensure the arrangements we are announcing today amount to a coherent package of measures that allow as many students as possible to sit their exams and that those 2021 exams and assessments are fair, accessible and robust.

We have established new governance arrangements with Ofqual to focus on the delivery of exams in 2021. This will ensure that roles and responsibilities for decision making are clear, decisions are taken in good time and by the appropriate organisation. I add my personal thanks to you and your officials for their continued support in delivering the best outcomes for this cohort of students.

Adaptations to exams and grading

I welcome your decision on grading that in recognition of the challenges students have faced, grading for 2021 GCSE, AS and A levels will be aligned with the overall outcomes from 2020. This generosity means that despite the disruption to their education, this cohort of students will not be disadvantaged compared to previous years.

I asked for your advice on how exams can best be adapted to take account of the disrupted education that this cohort of students are experiencing. I agree with Ofqual's advice that students and teachers should be given advance notice of some of the topic areas that will be covered in the exams. This will allow them to focus on depth of understanding in these areas and target their revision in the run up to exams. Additionally, in some subjects, support materials, such as formula sheets, will be provided, relieving students of the burden of memorising all the information they would normally.

Learning loss

I will establish an expert advisory group to provide advice to me on our ongoing response to the differential effect of the pandemic disruption that students are facing. Thank you for Ofqual's offer of advice to that group.

Contingency arrangements for exams

We agree that a series of contingency papers should be held after the main summer series to provide an opportunity for those unable to take an exam in the main series, with good reason, to gain a qualification.

One contingency paper will be made available for every GCSE and A level qualification that does not include non-exam assessment. Please would you consider with exam boards if contingency papers are required in subjects that include non-exam assessment and confirm this in January. You will need to regulate for a contingency paper to be provided by exam boards for any AS qualifications that are crucial to student progression, for example Maths and Further Maths.

The contingency papers will be scheduled between 28 June and 16 July allowing for at least a 10-day gap after each subject's final paper in the main series. Papers should be in a similar format to other papers (and similarly modified where requested) and will be produced specifically for this exam series. I am grateful for your support in ensuring exam boards will be ready to deliver this contingency next year and I recognise the additional challenges that will need to overcome to deliver these arrangements.

For students who miss an exam due because of the pandemic, but who have completed a proportion of their assessments for a qualification, arrangements will be in place to award those students a grade, using the assessments they did complete. I also ask for your support, working with the exam boards, to enable students who may be shielding and unable to take their exam in a school or other setting to be supported to sit their exams, for example, at home.

For the small minority of candidates who completed the course of study but who miss the main exams, any non-exam assessments and the contingency exam for a subject due to the pandemic, we expect that they should be awarded a grade, based on validated teacher assessment.

Vocational and technical qualifications

We must ensure that students taking vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications (that are not GCSEs or **AS/A** levels) are also treated fairly. I know that a range of adaptations are already in place, as permitted under your Extended Extraordinary Regulatory Framework and that some of the measures set out for GCSE, AS and A levels are already permitted for VTQs and other general qualifications, although approaches will not always be the same.

In addition to the flexibilities already allowed, I will permit further flexibilities to the department's performance table rules, including the reduction of assessments for some units, to support students taking VTQs and other general qualifications so they are not disadvantaged.

Where students taking VTQs or other general qualifications do not complete all of the assessment necessary and the special consideration process cannot be used, there should be a process through which the qualification can be awarded. I welcome your advice on the approaches that might be appropriate to apply to VTQs.

I am confident that the overall package of measures we are jointly creating will secure for students the fairest chance to show their potential and take their next step.

I am copying this to the Education Select Committee.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education