



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
20 Great Smith Street  
LONDON  
SW1P 3BT

5 November 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Thank you for your letter of 12 October 2020.

I am pleased to note the government's aim to keep schools and colleges open and to mitigate so far as possible the effect of the pandemic on students' education. We welcome your commitment to GCSE, AS and A level exams going ahead in 2021. We will be doing all that we can to ensure successful delivery of those exams next year, to the timetable you have announced. I note your confirmation that there will be no further changes to content to be assessed in 2021, and welcome the certainty that brings for teachers and students.

Like you, we are very aware of the potential for disruption to exams and other assessments in 2021, because of the pandemic. We are working with your officials and with exam boards to develop contingency proposals for you to consider, so that all in the system are prepared for the full range of scenarios we might together face.

Meanwhile, with Minister Gibb and your officials, we are discussing contingency options for all likely scenarios with school and college leaders and other stakeholders, so that your decisions will be informed by their views. Together, we expect to be in a position to provide advice as to then allow you to determine and confirm contingency arrangements with the sector in November.

Examinations measure each candidate's knowledge and understanding of the subject. In all years, a student's prospects and their opportunities to learn are of course affected by individual circumstances, but in this exceptional period, almost all students have already had less opportunity to learn in the usual ways, because of the pandemic. Some will be much more affected than others, because of their home circumstances or because of the path of the pandemic. It is important that we recognise that in every way possible, in a joined-up way across the system, without bending examinations out of shape.

Knowing this, you have already announced changes to the curriculum in certain subjects and agreed to changes to the assessment arrangements in a good

number of subjects. You have also agreed a later start to the examination series, to allow for the best part of three weeks' more teaching and learning time. We have been considering the dilemma in other ways as well.

Firstly, we are looking at what further steps we could take to make these exams less daunting a prospect for students, while of course making sure they remain a fair test of knowledge and understanding in each subject. I look forward to advising you of the options here – particularly where they could have implications for government's curriculum intentions in each subject.

Secondly, we are thinking carefully about the performance standard that should be aimed for in all these qualifications, in 2021. You wrote to Ofqual earlier in the year asking for our advice on this. We will be intent on making sure that results are sufficiently valid and fair across subjects, but there is nevertheless in our view an opportunity to recognise, and to compensate for the baleful impact of the pandemic for all students qualifying in 2021 (and possibly beyond), by setting national performance standards more generously than in normal times.

We are looking closely at that, and the relevant technical issues and fairness considerations, while also seeking views from a wide range of stakeholders including Higher and Further Education, teachers, parents and students themselves.

In your letter you refer to the arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels but I want to also mention here the work we are doing on arrangements for other regulated qualifications over the coming year. We are working closely with awarding organisations and with your officials, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on vocational, technical and other qualifications.

We have developed our Regulatory Framework for qualifications other than GCSE, AS and A levels, to allow awarding organisations to adapt assessments and qualifications where necessary and appropriate - to free up time for teaching and learning, and to make assessments as manageable and flexible as possible (for example because of social distancing constraints or other public health guidance).

We will monitor how awarding bodies make use of these new freedoms, with a keen eye on validity, but also an awareness of the practicalities of assessment for many of these qualifications.

In due course we will need to work together to promote public understanding of, and confidence in, the measures we will put in place for all qualifications, but for now, please be assured that we doing all we can to arrange for fair assessments for students in this exceptional year, and beyond.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'G Stacey', written in a cursive style.

Dame Glenys Stacey  
Acting Chief Regulator