

# Summer 2020 grades for GCSE, AS and A level, Extended Project Qualification and Advanced Extension Award in maths

Guidance for teachers, students, parents and carers

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## Introduction

On 18 March 2020, the Secretary of State for Education announced<sup>1</sup> that the summer 2020 GCSE, AS and A level exam series would be cancelled in order to help fight the spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19) and that students due to sit the exams would be awarded a grade based on an assessment of the grade they would have been most likely to achieve had exams gone ahead. On 23 March, in a written statement to Parliament<sup>2</sup>, the Secretary of State set out the government's intention that results would be issued to this year's cohort based on a range of evidence and data, including performance in mock exams and non-exam assessment.

This will give the vast majority of students the opportunity to progress to further study or employment as expected, despite the cancellation of exams.

Ofqual and the exam boards have done everything possible to make sure grades awarded this year are as fair as possible for students. This includes putting all centre assessment grades through an external standardisation process to better ensure that grades are comparable across schools and colleges and that national results are broadly similar to previous years. Between 15 and 29 April, we formally consulted on several aspects of the exceptional arrangements we have put in place for issuing grades in summer 2020. A [summary of the responses and the decisions are published separately](#) and we have updated our [information for Centres](#) document.

Any student who believes a grade they receive this summer does not reflect their ability will be able to sit an exam at the earliest possible opportunity in the autumn. Between 22 May and 8 June, we formally consulted on the details of the autumn exam series, and we have since published the outcomes of our [consultation](#).

Students who are studying GCSE, AS or A level courses, and who are due to take exams in 2021, will also have experienced disruption to their education this year. To ensure that exams and assessments in 2021 are as fair as possible in the circumstances, we will implement a suite of changes to the way some GCSEs, AS and A levels will be assessed in summer 2021. Between 2 and 16 July, we formally consulted on our arrangements for assessing GCSE, AS and A levels in 2021 and have published the [decisions](#) from this consultation.

This guidance aims to provide teachers, students, parents and carers with answers to some common questions about how grades are to be awarded in summer 2020 and how GCSE, AS and A levels will be assessed in 2021.

## Which qualifications are covered?

This information is relevant to all students and exam centres in England using the following qualifications regulated by Ofqual and offered by AQA, OCR, Pearson, WJEC Eduqas, ASDAN and City & Guilds:

- GCSEs (including short course GCSEs)
- AS and A levels

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/schools-colleges-and-early-years-settings-to-close>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Lords/2020-03-23/HLWS170/>

- Extended Project Qualifications (EPQ)
- Advanced Extension Awards (AEA) in maths.

## Does this process apply to vocational and technical qualifications too?

This process applies only to GCSE, AS and A levels, Extended Project Qualifications (EPQ) and Advanced Extension Awards (AEA) in maths. Many students will be taking other general and vocational or technical qualifications instead of or alongside GCSEs, AS and A levels. While this process does not apply to those qualifications, the same aims apply. Details of [our approach to awarding vocational, technical and other general qualifications](#) can be found on our website.

## Grading and standardisation

### How will centre assessment grades work?

We asked schools and colleges to use their professional experience to make a fair and objective judgement of the grade they believed a student would have achieved had they sat their exams this year. Schools and colleges took into account the full range of available evidence when they graded students - including non-exam assessment; the results of any homework assignments or mock exams; and any other existing records of student performance over the course of study. We also asked schools and colleges to provide a rank order of students within each grade in a subject. This is because the statistical standardisation process requires more granular information than the grade alone.

We provided clear guidance to schools and colleges on the grading and rank ordering process to help staff in different schools and colleges take a common approach to assessing their students.

Heads of Centre signed a declaration confirming the centre assessment grades and rank order were a true representation of their students' performance, before checking the data for accuracy, and submitting it to the exam board.

Earlier versions of this guidance document included answers to a number of common questions about the process schools and colleges should go through when grading and rank ordering their students. As this process is now complete, we have removed these questions from this guidance document. However, full details of the grading and rank ordering process can be found in our [Information for Heads of Centre document](#).

### Why do centre assessment grades need to be standardised?

So that results are as fair as possible, assessment judgements must be consistent across different schools and colleges. Because this year's arrangements have had to be put in place very quickly, we were not able to give teachers the opportunity to

develop a common approach to grading across the sector. Consequently, it is likely some centres were more lenient in their judgements, and others more severe.

The statistical model that exam boards will use to standardise grades provides a critical tool to maintain standards, both between centres and over time. This means universities, colleges and employers can be confident this year's results carry the same currency, and students can compete on a level playing field for opportunities with students from previous and future years.

## How will grades be standardised?

For each centre, in every subject, exam boards will use historical performance data to determine the proportion of students who achieved each grade in previous years. They will check this against prior attainment data for this year's students compared to the prior attainment of students making up the historical data. The predicted grade distribution for the centre in the subject might be adjusted upwards or downwards according to the prior attainment distribution of the 2020 students, compared to previous years. Exam boards will then overlay the centre's rank order of students onto the predicted grade distribution and allocate grades to students, without changing the rank order. This will have the effect of amending the centre assessment grade in order to align it with the predicted grade distribution meaning that, for some students, the grade they are allocated will not be the same as the centre assessment grade that was submitted.

Before results are issued, exam boards will compare national results with those in previous years – to check they are not too generous or too severe overall. The standardisation process ensures there is no national significant grade inflation and that everyone can have confidence in this year's results. In designing the standardisation model, we have taken a number of decisions which work in students' favour. As a consequence, national results this summer may be slightly higher than last year's, approaching an increase of 1% GCSE and around 2% for A level, although we will make sure there is not any significant change in year on year results for any subject which would undermine the value of the qualifications for progression.

## What data will the standardisation model use?

The standardisation model will draw on the following sources of evidence: historical outcomes for each centre; the prior attainment (based on Key Stage 2 or GCSE data) of this year's students and those in previous years within each centre; and the expected national grade distribution for the subject given the prior attainment of the national entry. For AS/A levels, the standardisation process will consider historical data from 2017, 2018 and 2019. For GCSEs, it will consider data from 2018 and 2019, except where there is only a single year of data from the reformed specifications. The model will not consider alternative qualifications to GCSEs as evidence of prior attainment.

## Will the standardisation model be the same across subjects and exam boards?

Yes, the design of the model will accommodate all subjects and will be delivered by all exam boards in a consistent way.

## Will the standardisation model cut all grades by a third, as reported in the media?

Students can be reassured that national results this summer will be broadly in line with previous years. In designing the standardisation model, we have made a number of decisions about specific details and where possible we have taken the approach that works in students' favour. This may mean this year's national results may be slightly higher than last year's, although we will make sure there is not any significant change in year on year results which would undermine the value of the qualifications for progression.

Any adjustments to grades made as a result of standardisation will be precisely determined by exam boards for each subject in each school and college, based on the evidence. Some grades will move downwards, and others upwards.

## Will the standardisation model take into account different sizes of centre or subject entry?

The standardisation process will be sensitive to the fact that centres with smaller entries (because of their centre size or number of students entered for a particular subject) usually see more year-on-year variation in results than in centres with larger entries. Centres with smaller entries will have greater weight placed upon the centre assessment grades when calculating results, as this is the more reliable source of evidence in these circumstances. We do not have one cut-off point to define a 'small entry' in a subject – instead, the process will use a sliding scale to adjust the weighting given to the centre assessment grade or statistical evidence depending on the number of students taking a subject at a centre.

The process will only place more weight on the statistical evidence than the centre assessment grades where we believe it will increase the likelihood of students getting the grades they would have likely achieved had they taken exams in 2020.

## Will the standardisation process take into account recent improvement in centre performance?

Ofqual's data<sup>3</sup> shows that for the vast majority of schools and colleges any year-on-year variation in results for a given subject is quite small. For GCSE in 2015 and 2016, 90% of centres were classed as having stable outcomes and 8.5% of centres were classed as having 'unstable results'. Only 0.8% of centres had results that increased by more than the national average change in both 2015 and 2016 and only 0.5% of centres had results that decreased more than the national average change in both 2015 and 2016.

While we recognise that a small number of centres would like standardised grades to reflect their recent or expected improvements in results, our research into GCSE grading shows the performance of centres rarely improves (or deteriorates) consistently in the short term. Because of this, we do not believe it is possible to design a statistically robust model which could reliably predict such improvements or deteriorations.

## Will the standardisation process disadvantage high attaining students in centres with previously lower performance?

Standardisation will draw on the historical outcomes of a centre as well as the prior performance of students in this year's cohort. Where the prior attainment of students in a subject for a centre is higher this year, the process will take this into account, which is likely to mean that the results for the centre will be higher than in previous years.

We recognise there will be students who may have achieved grades which were higher (or lower) than the calculated grades they will receive this summer, if the exams had taken place.

A school or college may have grounds to appeal against students' calculated grades where it can provide evidence that the ability profile of the students at a centre is such that it was expecting results this year to show a very different pattern to results in previous years. That could include where the grades of unusually high or low ability students have been affected by the model because they fall outside the pattern of results in that centre in recent years.

Students who do not feel their calculated grades reflect their likely performance will have an opportunity to sit exams in the autumn. If they choose to do so, they will be able to use the higher of the two grades for future progression.

## How will the standardisation process affect students with particular protected characteristics?

Fairness and equality have been at the heart of our decision-making this summer. We take seriously concerns about the potential for unconscious bias to inadvertently affect centre assessment grades and rank orders of students. We considered these carefully when developing the standardisation process and provided advice to centres about how to avoid bias when making their judgements.

We have carefully tested a range of models, and selected the one which most accurately predicts student grades. The model we have selected is the fairest possible in the circumstances and will ensure, so far as possible, that students are not advantaged or disadvantaged on the basis of their socio-economic background or particular protected characteristics.

We have already completed some early equalities analysis of the centre assessment grade data submitted which suggests the production of grades this year has not been compromised by bias in centres' judgements or by the standardisation model.

## How will this affect centres who have a very different cohort this year to previous years?

In some cases, schools and colleges may have a cohort of students who are very different from previous years, whether in terms of demographics or attainment. The standardisation model will take into account the historical results in a subject at a centre, but it will also consider any changes in the prior attainment profile of students taking that subject. If the prior attainment of students in the 2020 cohort of a centre is higher, or lower, than previous years, this will be reflected in the calculated grades.

In the rare event that there has been a substantive change in the cohort at a centre and the centre can demonstrate that this change undermines the use of historical data and prior attainment data for statistical standardisation, this would amount to using the wrong data for the purposes of standardisation. In these cases, centres can therefore appeal to the exam board(s) to seek to have the error corrected. This could include where the grades of unusually high or low ability students have been affected by the model because they fall outside the pattern of results in that centre in recent years.

## What if some students have no prior attainment data?

The standardisation process uses prior attainment of the cohort (at KS2 or GCSE) to reflect changes in the ability of students in a centre. We know that in many centres there may be some students without prior attainment data. Our standardisation model has been designed to accommodate this. It assumes that students without prior attainment data within a centre follow the overall grade distribution as those students without prior attainment from that centre in previous years. Centres with higher proportions of students without prior attainment data will have more weight placed on their historical outcomes (rather than changes in prior attainment) as part of the standardisation model.

We have thoroughly tested the accuracy of the standardisation model paying careful attention to these centres and students. Our testing indicates that they should not be systematically advantaged or disadvantaged by the standardisation process.

## How will this affect centres which have little or no historical outcomes for GCSEs or A levels?

There are various circumstances in which a centre may have little or no historical outcome data. Centres may be newly established or their students may have, until recently, taken alternative qualifications to GCSEs and A levels. Our statistical standardisation model is designed to accommodate this.

If a centre has no historical outcomes for last year, we will use data from the relevant previous years instead. If a centre has no historical outcomes at all in a subject, we will rely more on the centre assessment grades.

## How have exam boards ensured that the historical data used for standardisation is accurate?

Exam boards will ensure accurate historical information is used for each centre. Where centres have recently moved exam board, boards have shared data to ensure that the current board has the information they need. For schools or colleges that have recently merged with another or changed their name or status, exam boards have used the National Centre Number Register to ensure that accurate data from the previous centre number/names are used.

## Will the number of private candidates in a centre be taken into account in the standardisation process?

Heads of Centre were able to submit centre assessment grades for private candidates, and include those students in their rank order, where they believed they or their staff had seen sufficient evidence to make an objective judgement. But in most cases (aside from certain centres, such as distance learning providers supporting significant numbers of private candidates) the model will make sure that private candidates do not affect the grades of other students at the centre.

In most centres, private candidates will be temporarily removed when the standardisation model is run. Once the centre assessment grades for the remaining students have been standardised, the private candidates will be graded according to their position in the original rank order. If the centre has had its grades adjusted up or down, the grades of the private candidates registered with this centre will be similarly adjusted.

## Who else has input into the development of the standardisation model?

We engaged with a wide range of stakeholders as we developed the aims and principles of our standardisation model, and the technical detail that supports it. This included groups representing teachers, students, universities, organisations representing groups with different protected characteristics, and technical assessment and statistical experts. They have helped us to develop an approach to standardisation which we believe to be as fair and accurate as possible.

We formally consulted on the aims and principles of our standardisation process as part of our wider arrangements for awarding grades in summer 2020. We received broad support for our proposals from the c.16,000 individuals and organisations who responded.

## Why have you not shared more details of the standardisation model before now?

We have been extensively testing possible variations of the standardisation model with exam boards to ensure we select the model which gives students the fairest results possible and does not systematically disadvantage centres with differing levels of students with particular protected characteristics and socio-economic

backgrounds. Given the high stakes for the students involved, it was crucial to take this time to refine the model to ensure students can have confidence in their grades this year. We were also sensitive to the fact that releasing any more detail of the model whilst centres were still grading and rank ordering their students could have influenced how centres approached this task.

Now that the deadline for submitting information has passed, it is appropriate to release much more detail about how the model works. However, we will not release the precise technical detail of the model itself until A level results have been published, and therefore not before 13 August 2020. This is because we may need to make minor changes during the process of standardising results. Early publication of this information could also lead to some students unfairly finding out their results early, or cause unhelpful anxiety if they are incorrectly calculated.

## Will students see the centre assessment grades their school or college submits?

### *Before results day*

It is important schools and colleges do not share centre assessment grades, nor rank orders, with students or parents and carers before results day. This is to protect the integrity of the grading process, and to avoid teachers, heads of department/subject leads, senior leaders or Heads of Centre being put under pressure by students and parents to submit a grade that is not supported by the evidence. Since the final grades for some or all students in a centre could be different from those submitted, it also helps to manage students' expectations. Any inappropriate disclosure of centre assessment grades and/or rank order information before results day will be investigated by exam boards as potential malpractice and/or maladministration.

If centres receive subject access requests for centre assessment grades and/or rank order information before results day, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has confirmed that the exemption under Schedule 2, paragraph 25 of the Data Protection Act 2018 will apply. Further information for [organisations](#) and [students](#) on subject access requests can be found on the [ICO website](#).

### *On or after results day*

After results are issued, and subject to data protection and any other relevant legal considerations, schools and colleges may choose to provide students with their centre assessment grade and/or rank order information.

Where centre assessment grades and/or rank order information are given to students, we encourage centres to consider what additional information and guidance they provide so that students understand the context in which their final calculated result has been decided. Subject access requests received after results day should be processed in the usual manner. Guidance on these issues has been published by the [ICO](#), [Confederation of School Trusts](#), [ASCL](#) and [NEU](#).

## Results and progression

### When will results be released?

Results will be released on the published results days as originally planned. These are 13 August for A level and 20 August for GCSE.

### Will grades issued in 2020 have the same currency as grades issued in previous or future years?

The grades awarded to students will have the same currency as grades awarded in other years and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers. On the results slips and certificates, grades will be reported in the same way as in previous years and students with these grades can compete on a level playing field for opportunities with students from previous and future years.

### Will there be any flexibility in admissions decisions for students wishing to progress to further study?

We have asked centres offering post-16 courses to consider, where they can, their approach to admissions decisions, given students did not have the opportunity to sit exams and other assessments. While maintained and academy school sixth forms are required to comply with the [School Admissions Code](#), and will not be able to offer any flexibility in admissions decisions, the Code does not apply to independent schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges. These institutions may wish to consider greater flexibility in their admissions decisions than they would in any other year, to allow students to progress to the courses offered. Every school and college will have its own admissions policy and students need to discuss this with the relevant school or college directly.

We have also written to university representatives and to UCAS about admissions decisions this year. We are reassured to hear that they believe that institutions will be flexible, but we recognise this might not be possible in all cases.

### Can students appeal these grades?

Students can ask their school or college to check whether it made an administrative error when submitting their centre assessment grade or position in the rank order and, if it agrees it did make an error, to submit an appeal to the exam board. Schools and colleges can appeal if they believe something has gone wrong in relation to their results – for example, if a centre believes it has made an error when submitting its information; or similarly, that an exam board made a mistake when calculating, assigning or communicating a grade. We expect that any such errors will be quickly found and corrected. A centre can also appeal on behalf of their students if they can evidence grades are lower than expected because previous cohorts are not sufficiently representative of this year's students.

We have published information for students that explains how their grades were calculated this year and the options available to them if they believe their result was

not properly produced, including how to access an appeal via their centre. The [National Careers Service Exam Results Helpline](#) offers advice each year for students who have not received the results they had hoped for. Our helpline is also available to students and their parents or carers to talk about the appeals process and any other questions they may have about their results this summer. Full contact details are provided in our [student guide](#).

## Can students appeal against their original centre assessment grades (or rank orders)?

When consulting on this summer's arrangements, we considered carefully whether a student should be able to challenge their centre assessment grades and position in their centre's rank order. On balance, we decided it would not be in the interests of students or the fairness of the arrangements overall. Any appeal would have to be undertaken by someone better placed than the student's teachers to judge their likely grade if exams had taken place – in the unique circumstances of this summer, we do not believe there is any such person. In addition, because of the role of the rank order in grading this year, such an appeal would have implications for other students in the cohort: if one student successfully appealed against their position in the rank order, it would have negative implications for other students who would, in turn, need to be given an opportunity to appeal.

We recognise and take seriously concerns about risks of bias in judgements used this summer. Although our initial analysis of results suggests that at a national level there will generally be no widening of the gaps in attainment between different groups of students, it is possible that at an individual level a student may wish to make a complaint about bias or discrimination.

If students or others have concerns about bias, discrimination or any other factor that suggests that a centre did not behave with care or integrity when determining the centre assessment grade and/or rank order information they should normally raise these concerns with their centre, in the first instance; or they could take their concerns to the relevant exam board if this was the more appropriate route. Where there is evidence, we require exam boards to investigate such allegations as potential malpractice or maladministration. Such allegations would be very serious, and we expect them to be rare, but this is an important safeguard for students and their overall confidence in this year's grading arrangements.

Students who feel that their grades from the summer do not reflect their ability will have the opportunity to take their exams in the autumn series or in summer 2021. If they choose to do this, students will be able to use the higher of the two grades for future progression.

## How will students know if they've been subject to bias or discrimination?

We are committed to helping students and their families understand how to make a complaint about bias or discrimination. We have published specific [guidance](#) for students and their families to help them understand whether they might have reason to complain about bias or discrimination. Students can also contact the [Equality](#)

[Advisory Support Service](#) for advice if they think they have evidence of discrimination.

Our helpline, along with the National Careers Service exam results helpline, will be available to students and their parents or carers to talk about the appeals process and any other questions they may have about their results this summer. Full contact details are provided in our [student guide](#).

## Can centres appeal the operation of the standardisation model?

Centres will be able to appeal against the operation of the standardisation model where the wrong data was used to calculate results for learners, or where there was an administrative error in the issuing of results by an exam board.

A school or college may also have grounds to appeal where it can provide evidence of significant demographic changes in its cohort; or a significant event which it believes indicates that its students' performance in previous years might not be the most appropriate basis to reliably calculate results this year. This would amount to using the wrong data for the purposes of standardisation. In these cases, centres can appeal to exam board(s) to seek to have the error corrected. We expect these instances to be rare.

Examples of this might include if a single-sex school has changed to co-educational, or where a centre experienced a monumental event (flooding or fire which meant students had to re-locate) which affected one year's results in the historical data used in the model. Centres could also appeal in cases where – because of the ability profile of the students – they have evidence to indicate it was expecting results this year to show a very different pattern of grades to results in previous years. That could include where the grades of unusually high or low ability students have been affected by the model because they fall outside the pattern of results in that centre in recent years.

## Will there be a cost for appeals?

Fees for all aspects of the exam process are set by the exam boards. They will share further information on any fees for appeals before results are published.

## What is the deadline for appeals?

The deadline for appeals to be submitted to exam boards is 17 September 2020.

## Information for different groups of students

### How will this affect private candidates (including home educated students)?

We consulted on arrangements for private candidates this summer. We received broad support for our proposal to only allow exam boards to issue results for private candidates for whom the Head of Centre is confident their staff have seen sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to submit a centre assessment grade and include them in the centre's rank order. We have now confirmed this approach.

Both we and the exam boards published further guidance about the alternative sources of evidence a school or college might consider where it does not have sufficient evidence about a student's attainment to submit a centre assessment grade and rank order information. Heads of Centre were asked to tell any private candidates registered at the centre whether they would provide them with a centre assessment grade and include them in their centre's rank order.

### What about private candidates whose exam centre is unable to provide them with a centre assessment grade?

We worked with exam boards to exhaust all possible options to allow as many private candidates to get a grade as possible this summer. Our guidance allowed for private candidates to transfer to another centre ahead of the grading process this summer, if the school or college where they had registered decided it could not submit a centre assessment grade for them. In such cases, some other centres, such as those with experience of working with distance learners, worked with some of those private candidates who needed a grade this summer in order to progress. So that the grading process is fair, and to maintain the validity of the qualification, the Head of Centre must have had the same level of confidence in the grade and rank order position as for all other students.

The exam boards expected centres who were willing and approved to work with private candidates in this way to use any capacity to prioritise candidates who need to receive a grade to progress this summer. However, as the deadline for centres to submit centre assessment grades has now passed, the minority of private candidates who did not have a centre provide a centre assessment grade for them will not receive a grade this summer. We appreciate that this will be very disappointing for those candidates. These candidates will have the opportunity to take their exams in the autumn or next summer.

Given the particular challenges facing private candidates this summer, we have asked organisations that represent higher and further education providers to consider the steps that providers could take when making admissions decisions this summer for any private candidates who do not receive a grade. They have told us

that they believe that institutions will consider a range of other evidence and information for these students to allow them to progress wherever possible.

## **How will this affect students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)?**

We asked schools and colleges to use their professional experience to make a fair and objective judgement of the grade they believed a student would have achieved had teaching and learning continued as normal and they were able to sit their exams. For students with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), schools and colleges made their judgement assuming students had continued to receive any usual additional learning support. Where disabled students had an agreed reasonable adjustment for their exams, schools and colleges were asked to take account of the likely achievement of this student with the adjustment in place.

During the grading process, we suggested schools and colleges should approach other educational professionals who have worked closely with students with SEND to seek if they are able to provide further information to consider when coming to the centre assessment grade. This might have included, but was not limited to, qualified teachers of deaf, vision impaired and multi-sensory impaired children and young people.

We have completed some early equalities analysis of the centre assessment grade data submitted. This does not show any systematic bias against any particular groups of students this year, including those with SEND.

## **What about students who have an agreed reasonable adjustment or access arrangement?**

Schools and colleges judged the grade that these students would most likely have achieved if they had been able to sit their examinations with the intended reasonable adjustment or access arrangement in place.

## **Will special consideration apply this year?**

Special consideration requests are considered in the event that a student is unable to take an assessment or suffers a traumatic event that might affect their performance. These will not apply this summer because students did not take their exams. Instead we asked centres to make judgements which reflected how the students would have performed under ordinary circumstances. Where illness or other personal circumstances might have temporarily affected performance, for example in mock exams, centres were able to bear that in mind when making their judgements.

## **Might this approach be biased against students with certain protected characteristics?**

Our overriding priority is to ensure that this year's grading is as fair as possible, given the exceptional circumstances, so that students can progress to the next stage of their education or training.

We believe the process of calculated grades we have set out is fairest in the circumstances. Nonetheless, we recognise, and take seriously, concerns about the potential for students to be disadvantaged by the approach being taken this summer. We have considered these carefully when developing the arrangements, alongside the published literature, the views of interested groups with whom we have engaged during this process and the many consultation responses we received.

To mitigate the risk of bias, centres were asked to use their professional experience to make an evidence-based, objective, holistic judgement of the grade they believe a student would have achieved had they been able to take exams this year. In light of concerns raised, we published further guidance to help centres make these judgements. This guidance has been informed by assessment research and the insight of relevant stakeholders.

We have also built in further safeguards to the standardisation model, carefully testing a range of possible standardisation models to ensure that we selected the one which most accurately predicts student grades while ensuring that this is not at the expense of any students who share certain protected characteristics. The model we have selected is the fairest possible in the circumstances and will ensure, so far as possible, that students are not advantaged or disadvantaged on the basis of their socio-economic background or particular protected characteristics.

We have already completed some early equalities analysis of the centre assessment grade data submitted which suggests the production of grades this year has not been compromised by bias in centres judgements or by the standardisation model.

Students who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance will also have the opportunity to sit an exam in the autumn.

## **How will this affect early entrants?**

Students in year 10 and below who had been entered to complete exams in GCSEs, AS and A levels this summer will be issued with results on the same basis as students in year 11 and above.

## **How will this affect students who have English as an additional language (EAL)?**

Schools and colleges used their professional experience to make a fair and objective judgement of the grade they believed a student would have achieved had teaching and learning continued as normal and had they sat their exams. For students with English as an additional language (EAL), schools and colleges were asked to consider the likely language acquisition a student would have made by the time of the exam, and any increased ability to demonstrate subject content knowledge as part of this, and reflect this in their judgement. They could also seek further information from specialist EAL teachers .

## **How about students who have improved significantly since their mock exams?**

We know that all students work differently. Some perform best in non-exam assessment or mock exams; others perform at their best in final exams. This is why

it was so important that schools and colleges made holistic judgements about the grades they believed their students would have most likely achieved had they been able to complete their assessments. We asked them to use their professional expertise to draw on the full range of available evidence rather than solely assigning grades based on performance in a mock exam, for example.

## Autumn exams

### Who will be eligible to take exams in the autumn?

Entry to autumn exams will be open to all students who had entered for GCSEs, AS and A levels in the summer series and to those who the exam board believes have made a compelling case about their intention to have entered the summer series. Students who would normally be entitled to take GCSEs in English language and maths in November will also be able to take exams in those subjects. Between 22 May and 8 June, we formally consulted on the details of the autumn exam series. We took account of the responses to our consultation when finalising our approach and have now published our [decisions](#).

### When will the autumn exam series be held?

AS and A-level exams will begin on Monday 5 October and finish on Friday 23 October. GCSE exams will begin on Monday 2 November and finish on Monday 23 November. The entry deadline for students wishing to take AS and A level exams in the autumn is 4 September. Students wishing to take GCSE exams in the autumn need to have entered by 18 September, except in the case of English language and maths where the deadline is 4 October.

We understand the logistical challenges schools and colleges will face in the autumn and we will continue to talk to the sector about this. The Department for Education is exploring ways to minimise additional burdens on centres. Centres that usually enter particularly large numbers of students for GCSE English language and maths in the autumn are likely to face particular challenges in accommodating students in exam conditions this year. We have therefore decided to permit exam boards to run a further series in January for GCSE English language and maths only – if there is demand for this. This would allow centres, if they wished, to split their entry between November and January. This would also allow for more teaching time to prepare students for their exams.

### Which centres will enter students in autumn exams?

Where a student wishes to sit an exam in the autumn, the Department for Education have confirmed in their [guidance](#) that the centre responsible for entering the student in the 2020 summer series should enter the student in the autumn series and take overall responsibility for ensuring that they have somewhere appropriate to sit their exams.

## Will students be able to sit all of their exams in the autumn?

Yes. To ensure this is fair for all students, we will require exam boards to offer the full suite of GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in the autumn. This means any student who does not feel their calculated grade reflects their ability is given the opportunity to sit an exam at the earliest reasonable opportunity.

## If students are unhappy with a grade do they have to take all their exams in the autumn or can they just take exams in the subject they are unhappy with?

Students will not have to sit exams in all subjects in the autumn. They may take exams in as few subjects as they would like to. If a student wishes to take exams in a particular subject in the autumn, they will need to take all the exam papers in that subject.

## Will the format of exam papers in the autumn series be any different to usual?

No. We believe it is important that students take a style of exam paper which is familiar to them and allows them to demonstrate the full range of their knowledge. The format of exam papers in the autumn series will, therefore, be the same as those usually offered in the summer. We have formally consulted on these proposals and received support for this approach.

## Will there be non-exam assessment in the autumn series?

While it would be desirable for the autumn series to include NEA, in the current circumstances, we believe that the fairest option is for qualifications taken in the autumn to be based on students' exam performance only. The exception to this is in art and design, where exam boards will set a new task that students would need to complete under supervised conditions.

This is because some students will have completed non-exam assessment before schools and colleges closed on 20 March, but others will not have done so. As students will be at different stages in their non-exam assessments, and because many will no longer be studying in the centres in which they started their assessments in the autumn, we do not believe it would be fair (even if it were manageable) for students to complete the non-exam assessments they had started.

We have published [research](#) about the impact of coursework on different groups of students, such as those of different ethnicities and gender, to check that the removal of non-exam assessment will not have a disproportionate impact on students that share certain characteristics. This concludes that variation in GCSE and A level grade outcomes is largely explained by students' prior attainment, and finds little evidence that coursework in the subjects researched has any impact on outcomes for different groups of students, including those with special educational needs

## **What about exam fees this year? Will there be a cost for students taking exams in the autumn?**

Fees for exams are set by the exam boards. Fees are payable by centres for students enrolled in school or college. External/private candidates pay their own fees and should enquire with the relevant board about these. Exam boards have begun to share with centres further information on fees for awarding grades this summer and for the optional autumn exam series.

## **Will students choosing to take an exam this autumn still be able to go to university this year?**

Students may still choose to take an exam even where their university or college place has been confirmed. However, it will take time for the results of these exams to be issued, so they will need to discuss with their higher or further education institution whether to start their course as planned or to delay their entry.

We have asked organisations that represent higher and further education providers to consider how they might be flexible in admissions decisions, considering delays to entry to courses, for any students choosing to take an exam this autumn. We are reassured to hear that they believe that institutions will be flexible wherever possible, but we recognise this might only be possible in a minority of cases.

## **When will the results of the autumn exams series be released?**

The exam boards will confirm results days for the autumn series shortly but are working towards A level results to be published before Christmas and GCSE results early in 2021.

## **If students take an exam this autumn, which will stand – the exam or calculated grade?**

Students who feel that their grades from the summer do not reflect their ability will have the opportunity to take their exams in the autumn series or in summer 2021. If they choose to do this, students will be able to use the higher of the two grades for future progression.

## **Will students be able to appeal the results of the autumn exam series?**

The autumn series will replicate a normal summer exam series as far as is possible. The normal review of marking and appeal arrangements will therefore apply to the autumn series.

# Assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021

## How will students taking GCSEs, AS and A levels be assessed in 2021?

We recognise students expecting to take exams and assessments next year, and their teachers, parents and carers, are understandably concerned about the impact coronavirus (COVID-19) has had on their education. The Department for Education has introduced a number of measures to help reduce the impact of school and college closures. Our focus is on exams and assessments – and ensuring they are as fair as possible and support the well-being of students.

In line with government policy, we are planning for exams and assessments to be taken next year. However, given the lost education students will have experienced during the spring and summer terms of 2019/2020, and because of the potential for on-going public health safeguards, we have developed a package of changes to these exams and assessments. Overall, these will free up teaching time, reduce pressure on students and allow assessments to be undertaken within current public health restrictions. We publicly consulted on these arrangements, receiving around 29,000 responses. We have now confirmed our [decisions](#).

## What changes to GCSEs, AS and A level assessments are you planning for 2021?

We will require exam boards to make changes to exams and assessments which we believe will protect the validity of the qualifications whilst freeing up more teaching time, and, in limited cases, reduce what needs to be taught. We have also considered changes that might be needed to assessments if public health protection measures are in place. The nature of these changes will depend on the qualification and subject in question – there is no one size fits all approach. The full details of changes to assessments in each subject in 2021 are provided in our [consultation decisions document](#).

They include changes to 15 A level subjects, and 25 GCSE subjects. Based on the most commonly taken combinations of GCSEs, most GCSE students will benefit from the changes being made.

## Will the subject content of exams and assessments change?

The content for each qualification is determined by the government. In [his letter to us, the Secretary of State for Education explained that he was not minded to specify changes to the content which forms the foundation for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications](#). This is because centres teach the elements of their courses in the order that best suits them, and so any change to content may not benefit all centres equally. A reduction in course content may also negatively impact students moving on to the next stage of their education.

In many subjects, we will make changes to free up teaching time without changing the way subject content is sampled. In some subjects, however, we believe changing what is assessed is the most appropriate way to support students who have lost learning time. Following our consultation, we will allow a choice of topics on which students will be examined in GCSE English literature, GCSE history and ancient history in the 2021 exams.

We believe that, in the circumstances, this is the fairest way to mitigate the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) for students taking these qualifications in summer 2021 and that changes will not unduly affect students' successful progression to A level. As GCSE English literature, in particular, is taken by the majority of GCSE students, this change is likely to have a positive impact on many of those sitting exams next summer.

## Will the number and format of the exams change?

After consulting on the issue, we have confirmed that exams taken in 2021 should be of the same number and length in each subject and in a familiar format as in previous years. We do not believe they should include more optional questions than usual, except in the specific case of GCSEs in English literature, history and ancient history where students would know in advance which units would be optional.

We believe that changing the number and format of exams would introduce significant risks into the assessment process, most notably a risk to fairness. In the case of optional questions, for example, research suggests that some students, particularly those who tend to perform less well in exams, do worse when given more freedom over question choice. Other studies have shown differences in the scores of equally able students who select different optional questions in an exam paper. [We explored this research in detail in our consultation.](#)

Changes to the number or length of exams could be unsettling to students and would carry an increased risk of errors. Although reducing the number of exams could make the exam timetable shorter and more manageable, it would also increase the risks that students would miss all of their exams in the summer if they experienced an adverse effect like illness or bereavement. This risk would be heightened if coronavirus (COVID-19) is still in circulation.

## What adaptations to assessments will you make to free up teaching time?

We will be making a range of adaptations to assessments in 2021 which are designed to free up teaching time. The specific changes for each qualification are set out in detail in our [consultation decisions document](#). Examples of such adaptations include: removing the requirement to record the spoken language assessment in GCSE English language; allowing GCSE students to observe (rather than undertake) practical science work; allowing mock-up or detailed plans to be marked instead of completed design and technology prototypes; and removing the requirement for students to undertake fieldwork in certain GCSE, AS and A level qualifications.

## What changes will you be making to the assessment of fieldwork?

In our consultation we proposed that, in GCSE geography, we should remove the requirement for students to undertake a set number of days of fieldwork in 2021 and that the 2021 exams should not include questions that focussed on the fieldwork that students usually would have undertaken. We received strong support for this proposal, with many respondents arguing for similar changes to be made to A level geography and other qualifications in 2021, because of the potential obstacles they foresee for students undertaking fieldwork during the next academic year.

In light of the strength of feeling, we have decided to align the approach in A level geography to that of GCSE, although A level students will still have to undertake an individual investigation. We have also confirmed similar decisions for GCSE, AS and A level geology; AS and A level environmental science; and modified the arrangements for observation in GCSE astronomy.

## How will this affect the assessment of spoken language skills in GCSE modern foreign languages?

We will require exam boards to modify their specifications to allow the speaking element of GCSE modern foreign language qualifications to be assessed through a teacher endorsement alongside the 9 to 1 grade. Common assessment criteria will be produced for teachers to use when assessing students' spoken language skills, so that these can be assessed within normal teaching and learning time. This will ensure students continue to develop their speaking skills while giving teachers some flexibility over how they approach the oral assessment.

## Why are there different approaches to assessment in GCSEs, AS and A levels?

A number of respondents to our consultation queried whether further changes should be made to A levels to reflect changes to GCSEs in the corresponding subject. We explained in our consultation that we had treated A level students differently to their GCSE peers – in part because they are more accustomed to independent study. Changes of the type being sought by respondents to our consultation would also generally require changes to subject content. Government policy is not to make wide scale changes to content for 2021, particularly at A level. The Secretary of State has noted the importance of retaining content at A level to ensure students are able to successfully transition to higher and further education.

Nonetheless, we have proposed changes to A levels where needed to accommodate possible public health restrictions. We have also agreed additional changes to some A level subjects that involve non-exam assessment and fieldwork. These are detailed in our [consultation decisions document](#).

## When will the 2021 summer exam series be held?

We have asked the exam boards to consider how the 2021 exam timetable could be changed to allow more time for teaching – in particular, whether GCSE exams could

start after half term, on 7 June 2021. We sought views on changes to the GCSE, AS and A level timetable in our consultation and received general support for a delay to the exams, to allow more time for teaching. However, a number of risks and issues were also highlighted in the responses.

Any decision on changes to the exam timetable are not for Ofqual alone. We will continue to work with the DfE, exam boards, regulators in Wales and Northern Ireland, and groups representing schools, colleges and higher education to consider the best approach, and we will confirm our decisions as soon as possible.

## How can assessments operate next year if public health safeguards remain in place?

We do not yet know the extent to which public health safeguards such as social distancing will remain necessary next academic year. However, some subject requirements, particularly those that require group activities, could be more difficult to undertake if public health safeguards continue. We have identified subjects in which modifications will be needed in non-exam assessment arrangements to accommodate potential public health requirements. This includes changes to performance rules in A level dance, drama and music. The full list of measures is set out in our [consultation decisions document](#).

## How will you ensure standards in 2021 are maintained with previous and future years?

We understand students and teachers want reassurance about how outcomes might be protected through our approach to grading next year, similar to how we protected the interests of students who took the reformed qualifications for the first time. This will play an important part in our overall support for the 2021 cohort. We are considering our approach and will provide further information in due course.

## Are there contingency plans in case of continued disruption from the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?

Our arrangements for the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021 assume that it will be possible for exams and assessments to take place next year, in line with the Secretary of State for Education's letter to Ofqual. Nonetheless, we recognise there is a risk of further disruption next year. We will continue to develop contingency measures, exploring different options.



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