



**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](http://www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus)

Simon Lebus  
Chief Regulator, Ofqual  
Earlsdon Park, 53-55 Butts Road  
Coventry  
CV1 3BH

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Dear Simon,

I want to thank Ofqual for the collaborative work over recent months to prepare for all potential scenarios in relation to exams in 2021. This work puts us in a good position to deal with the unfortunate situation we find ourselves in as a result of the pandemic.

As has become clear, the pandemic requires government to take additional measures to control the spread of the virus. The rapid rise in Covid-19 meant the country had to move into a new phase of national restrictions, and our plans have sadly had to be reviewed as schools and colleges need to play their part in the fight against this terrible disease.

As the Prime Minister said on 4 January, new national restrictions in England are essential, and all primary schools, secondary schools and colleges have moved to remote education, except for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, until at least February half-term. Education is a national priority, but the progress of the virus means we are now at the point where everything possible has to be done to reduce transmission.

Given the further disruption, we cannot guarantee that all students will be in a position to sit their exams fairly this summer and it is my firm policy position that alternative arrangements are needed to award qualifications. My department and Ofqual had already worked up a range of contingency options. Having considered those options, I am asking Ofqual to consult on alternative arrangements for GCSE, AS and A levels which should involve the awarding of grades based on teacher assessment. We recognise students taking vocational, technical and other general qualifications used for progression will have suffered similar levels of disruption, and we want to ensure that students taking these qualifications are not disadvantaged in comparison to their peers taking GCSEs, AS and A levels. Our propositions for these vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) are outlined in this letter and I am asking Ofqual to consult on those matters as well.

I am writing, therefore, to ask that you continue to work jointly with my department on alternative arrangements based on teachers' assessment and prepare to launch a consultation, so that we can give students, parents and teachers certainty, quickly. Given that there remain decisions for me to take on matters of government policy, and for you on changes to the regulatory framework, I suggest that it will make sense for us to conduct a joint consultation. Following the consultation, I will issue a direction to you, having considered the responses, to set out my expectations for the way in which qualifications should be delivered this year.

We have agreed that we will issue the consultation document later this week, and that, recognising the need both to engage widely, and to reach conclusions quickly, it will run for a fortnight. We will make every effort during that time to hear as many people's views and suggestions as possible.

The remainder of this letter sets out my views on the policy that should underpin the consultation document, and which I know you will have regard to in a way that is consistent with my role in setting policy direction, and yours as the statutory regulator.

## **The consultation**

### GCSEs, AS and A levels

Given the disruption children and young people have faced, it is vital we maximise the remaining opportunity for them to be taught for as long as possible, so they have every opportunity to catch up. This will enable them to successfully progress, be that onto further or higher education or employment. It is my view that a teacher's final judgement on a student's grade ought to be as late as possible in the academic year to maximise remaining teaching time and ensure students are motivated to remain engaged in education.

This year we are asking teachers to assess their students, and it is my view that we should seek ways to support them to do so in a fair and consistent fashion. A breadth of evidence should inform teachers' judgements, and the provision training and guidance will support teachers to reach their assessment of a student's deserved grade. This should be drawn out in the consultation. In addition, I would like to explore the possibility of providing externally set tasks or papers, in order that teachers can draw on this resource to support their assessments of students. We should seek views in the consultation on what broader evidence should determine a teacher's assessment of a student's grade and whether we should require or recommend the use of the externally set tasks or papers. We should also seek to minimise the additional burdens for teachers and schools created by this need for evidence.

It is my view that the consultation should set out proposals which allow students to be assessed based on what they have learnt, rather than against content they have not had a chance to study. This will need to be balanced against the need to ensure good enough coverage of the curriculum for all students to

support successful progress. We have agreed that we will not use an algorithm to set or automatically standardise anyone's grade.

Schools and colleges should undertake quality assurance of their teachers' assessments and provide reassurance to the exam boards. We should provide training and guidance to support that, and there should also be external checks in place to support fairness and consistency between different institutions and to avoid schools and colleges proposing anomalous grades.

However, my view is that any changes to grades as a result of the external quality assurance process should be the exception: the process will not involve second-guessing the judgement of teachers but confirming that the process and evidence used to award a grade is reasonable. Changes should only be made if those grades cannot be justified, rather than as a result of marginal differences of opinion. Any changes should be based on human decisions, not by an automatic process or algorithm.

It is important that there is a clear and accessible route for private candidates to be assessed and receive a grade, and so the consultation should seek views on their options to do so. There should also be a route for any student who does not believe their grade reflects the standard of their work to request a review and appeal their grade, the details of which we should explore fully in the consultation.

### Other general qualifications

There are some other general qualifications, such as Core Maths and the International Baccalaureate, whose structure and assessment methods mean they are more similar to GCSEs and A levels than to VTQs. It is my view that the approach taken to awarding these qualifications should be similar to that taken to GCSEs and A levels, and I would like the consultation to consider that approach.

### **Vocational and Technical qualifications (VTQs)**

I announced on 5 January that the January external examinations of VTQs can continue where schools, colleges and other FE providers judge it is right to do so. This reflected the fact that students and staff have worked hard to prepare for the January exams and students were ready to take them, and that these exams could proceed safely in January as providers had been implementing protective measures to ensure they could be conducted in line with PHE measures. I have been clear that all students will be able to progress fairly, irrespective of whether they sat an exam in January.

For many VTQs, internal and external assessment occurs throughout the year. Awarding organisations have been working to adapt their assessments to mitigate the impacts of disruption on teaching, learning and assessment, as well as responding to public health measures such as social distancing. The government expects that where assessment has already been completed, this will be taken into account when awarding a result. As with the approach for

students taking GCSEs and A levels, I am keen to maximise the opportunities for students to continue to develop their knowledge and skills and catch up on any lost learning for the remainder of this academic year. I would expect internal assessment to continue, and to take place remotely, for these qualifications wherever possible, whilst recognising that the level of disruption suffered might mean that not all internal assessment can be completed by all students.

### **Assessments in February and March**

Further external examinations are currently scheduled to take place in February and March for some VTQ students. Where these assessments enable a student to demonstrate the proficiency required to enter directly into employment, are needed to complete an apprenticeship, or assessments are available 'on-demand' such as Functional Skills or English as a Second Language (ESOL), as agreed with you, they should continue to proceed with protective measures put in place to ensure they are conducted in line with PHE measures. This is to ensure these students can continue to progress fairly with their studies or into employment and employers are assured that students have reached the necessary level of occupational skill.

However, given the further disruption, for all other VTQs with written exams scheduled in February and March (including BTECs and other qualifications included in performance tables) it is no longer viable for these exams to go ahead. Views on alternative arrangements for these qualifications should be sought in the consultation.

Where assessment for Functional Skills qualifications can take place online and where students are ready to take them in the coming weeks, my view is that assessment should continue as planned. For students who are unable to access assessment in this way, my view is that there should be alternative assessment arrangements put in place following the outcomes of the consultation.

### **Assessments from April - August 2021**

#### Qualifications used to support progression instead of, or alongside, GCSE and A levels

Many VTQs are used for progression to further study instead of, or alongside, GCSEs and A levels, and it is critical that these students are awarded a qualification and can access the same progression opportunities. Last year, these qualifications, such as BTECs and Cambridge Nationals and Technicals, received calculated results. It is my expectation that a similar group of qualifications will again, this year, need to have alternative arrangements to examined assessments and that we should use this consultation to seek views on the detail of these arrangements and the qualifications in scope of this approach. These arrangements may need to be different in some cases to those put in place last year to take account of the different circumstances.

### Qualifications demonstrating occupational competency

There are a number of qualifications where a practical demonstration of occupational skills is needed to award the qualification. These may be standalone qualifications, part of an apprenticeship, or provide entry into a particular profession. Whilst I recognise that these students will also have faced disruption to their education, it is not possible to award qualifications that require students to demonstrate occupational proficiency on the basis of teacher judgement alone, because often there are health and safety or regulatory elements where assessment is critical. Awarding organisations have already adapted their qualifications to account for disruption and public health guidance. In line with the decision on February and March assessments, I expect that these proficiency-based assessments should continue wherever possible, subject to public health guidance, so that students are able to progress to the next stage of their lives. However, where students would prefer to or need to defer their assessment, my view is that they should be able to do so.

### **Further and higher education (FE and HE)**

It is important we give FE and HE providers the earliest possible indication of the process and timescale for how grades will be awarded and their overall implications, so they can plan and pitch their remaining offers appropriately. For HE specifically, the UCAS deadline for most courses has been pushed back to the end of January, giving us a window to set out our plans before the majority of offers are made. The Minister for Universities is working closely with the sector to ensure we avoid the scenario of over-subscription which we saw in the summer of 2020, and to protect the interests of disadvantaged students.

We must ensure the consultation reaches a wide audience and so it should specifically seek the views of teachers, school and college leaders, students and their parents. Our officials will be jointly hosting a series of meetings with representatives of the sector including teacher unions, exam boards, school and college leaders and the FE and HE sectors.

I look forward to continuing to work together on this most important of matters.

I am copying this to the Chair of Ofqual, Ian Bauckham, the Chair of the Education Select Committee, and my counterparts in the Devolved Administrations.



**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
**Secretary of State for Education**