Exams and assessments in the months ahead

Introduction

I understand how difficult life has been for students, their parents and carers, and teachers this year. Many have had to self-isolate. Students have missed different amounts of teaching and learning time up and down the country. Teachers, school and college leaders have had to work in truly exceptional circumstances, teaching students both in school or college and at home, getting them ready for GCSE, AS and A level exams next summer, and for assessments and exams for vocational and technical qualifications. Parents have had to juggle working and home schooling.

I do not doubt how unrelenting and demanding this has been since the start of the pandemic. And I suspect it will continue to be challenging for some time as the impact of the pandemic washes through the education system.

At Ofqual, we have been working hard to look at different options for the forthcoming exams and assessments. We have been listening to students, parents, teachers, school and college leaders and training providers. We have been working with the Department for Education, the exam boards and awarding organisations. We have been speaking to universities and colleges, equality organisations, subject associations and teacher representatives.

Why exams are the fairest

So, while there are many uncertainties that we all face in the months ahead, I thought I would set down what we at Ofqual are proposing and why. First, I need to say quite clearly that we got it wrong last summer and we are sorry. Like other regulators across the UK, and with the best intentions, we worked with school and college leaders, the government and others to build a substitute for exams in a pandemic.

But it was not acceptable for a student to be denied the chance to show what they know, understand and can do, and instead to be given grades that the system thought they deserved. Summer 2020 showed us the importance of exams and external assessments. Despite every effort and every good intention, other ways of assessing students are likely to be less fair.

We firmly support exams going ahead next summer. Exams allow each student to show what they know and understand from the curriculum and, importantly, everyone has the same chance to show what they know. They are asked the same questions, at the same time, and they are marked in the same way. And marked anonymously.

Research suggests that when we assess students using a different method, bias can creep in. That is not always the case, but the result can be that bright

students from disadvantaged backgrounds or students with special educational needs or disabilities suffer the most.

If teachers were to allocate grades this summer instead, they could, for example, assume that students who have been away from school would not do very well, when that may not be the case for everyone. It will be different for each student. Exams can allow students to pull it out of the bag.

Let us not forget, many students taking exams in summer 2021 will be nearly two-thirds through their courses by now. And while we have heard that some are anxious, we have heard from others who are keen to show what they can do in an exam.

I know that students have felt huge pressure this term, as have their teachers. There were some things we were able to agree early that will have helped – changes to how content is assessed in GCSE history and ancient history, to help teachers and students cover that content in appropriate depth. Changes to GCSE English literature, so that students are assessed on one fewer text than usual. Changes to fieldwork in a number of subjects and speaking assessments for GCSE modern foreign languages. More use of remote assessment and simulation of skills, and increased assessment windows in vocational qualifications. This has eased the pressure on many students and teachers. But we need more.

Grading

We know how important grades are, and that people carry them with them their whole lives. We need to be as fair to students as we can be in summer 2021. Summer 2020 results were unique, not just in how they were derived but in relation to the levels of achievement recorded, when compared to previous years. Overall, A level A and A* grades were up by 13 percentage points and GCSE grade 4 and above by 9 percentage points.

We have decided to carry forward the overall level of generosity from 2020 through to summer 2021. This is a big step that we hope recognises the disruption and lost learning caused by the pandemic at an overall, national level.

What does this decision mean for students? It is likely that students studying GCSEs, AS and A levels will not need to demonstrate the same level of performance in summer 2021 as in previous years to get a particular grade. But in general, this means that students in 2021 have as much chance of getting a grade A or a grade 4 as they did in 2020. We took a similar approach to account for dips in learning in the early years of new GCSEs. We and exam boards have the tools, and the experience to do this fairly.

We have decided on this radical step because we know that the pandemic has affected students and their studies deeply, and that it continues to do so. Some students in 2021 will be competing for higher education places or jobs with 2020 students, whose grades across the board were a lot higher than in 2019. Fairness matters.

All subjects will be generous to the same extent. For example, students taking biology will not be in a more advantageous position than students taking history. What we saw in summer 2020 was that certain subjects, such as music, received higher grades overall than other subjects, and to continue to maintain those differences would be unfair.

How will we do this?

Grading (also called awarding) takes place after exams have been sat, and after all the students' papers have been marked. Exam boards total the marks across all papers and any non-exam assessment, so that each student has an overall mark. Grading is the final step in the process.

Grade boundaries – the lowest mark needed for a particular grade – are set by senior examiners. In a normal year, they aim to set a boundary that reflects a similar quality of work as previous years. That might mean looking at the quality of essays in English literature or history, or the extent to which a student can tackle the most complex problems in maths.

Next summer, we will regulate so that each exam board uses prior attainment data (from national key stage 2 or GCSE data) to identify grade boundaries to produce overall outcomes in line with 2020. Senior examiners will review student work at those grade boundaries – to make sure boundaries are not too low or too close together. Then the final grade boundaries will be set and applied to all students.

As we oversee awarding, we will be keeping a close eye on how acceptable those grade boundary positions will be, as we need to make sure the public can be confident that the grades are credible. We cannot bend exams out of shape too much, or they become meaningless.

You can read more about the detail of how we'll do this in the advice we gave to the Secretary of State for Education.

Adapting exams

We do not yet know the extent to which students taking their exams next summer will have had their education disrupted by the pandemic. But we know that some students will find the prospect of taking exams next summer daunting, and some will feel less well prepared than others because of the disruption they have experienced.

We considered a range of ways to adapt exams. These adaptions are in addition to those announced in August 2020. None of these options are straightforward. Each has pros and cons, and each might affect particular groups of students.

We propose giving students and schools advance notice in most subjects of some of the topic areas that will come up in the exam ahead of the exam itself. This will allow revision and teaching to be more focused, without unduly undermining the validity of exams. It means students can get their heads down and use their study time as best they can. We anticipate being able to pre-announce the subjects and topics in January 2021.

This is another radical step. The content of exams is usually highly confidential, and we take great pains to make sure that exam papers are held securely before those exams are taken. The questions themselves will not be revealed, but the broad topic or content area. We think this will allow students who are behind to feel more confident about their ability to catch up. We will, though, want to make sure that this will be designed in a way that answers cannot simply be memorised or regurgitated. What a miserable form of education that would be.

For some subjects, there could be additional support materials for use in the exam, such as formula sheets. All of these possible adaptations would apply to all students taking the qualifications, regardless of how much their education has been affected by the pandemic.

Teachers and students will be able to use the remaining time before exams most effectively, so this should benefit those most affected by learning loss.

Some have suggested more optionality in exams. This could mean a wider choice of questions on exam papers – a greater choice of topics, for example. This sounds appealing, but sadly the evidence is that disadvantaged or less well-prepared students often make poor question choices. And it is near impossible to set optional questions at a precisely comparable level of difficulty. This can result in some students having to meet a higher standard than other students, which is clearly unfair. We have recently published our research into optionality in the context of the 2021 summer exam series.

Alternatively, some have suggested students could be allowed to drop a paper in a particular subject. Many subjects have two or three papers in each series. But this is also not as straightforward as it sounds. The four exam board specifications are often structured differently, so dropping a paper can have a differential impact depending on the exam board. That creates an uneven playing field and is simply not fair.

Relying on significantly less assessment than in normal years (i.e. cutting down the number of exam papers or assessments a student takes in a particular subject) could also reduce the reliability of grading – the chances of a student getting the grade they deserve. This can happen particularly in those subjects with more subjective marking, such as sociology, or where quite different skills or content are assessed in each component. Combined science, for example, has biology, chemistry and physics papers for some specifications. Other specifications have papers that bring together the content across the three sciences. And in a summer when we might expect more students than usual to miss one of their papers due to illness or self-isolation, it increases the risk that a student might miss all assessments in a subject.

So, in effect, introducing more optionality could introduce more problems than it would solve. Pre-announcement of exam content is a less risky approach and has the same advantages. Like optionality, it allows teachers and students to focus in on areas of the curriculum but in a fairer way. It is also important to keep exams as familiar as possible for students and

teachers – changes can sometimes make exams harder and more stressful.

Lost learning

I would like to say more about learning loss, and how to help students who may have lost more learning time than others – differential learning loss. There is not a simple solution. Exams and grading cannot fix the different levels of learning loss by themselves. That is not what they are for and it is not what they do. Instead the answers lie outside the exam hall.

While the measures set out above should help, higher and further education have a part to play. That is why we have been speaking to the university and further education sector about how they will interpret next summer's results when they are offering places to students. It is important that users of qualification results understand that some students would have done better if the pandemic had not occurred and they will want to take that context into account in making decisions.

We welcome the government setting up an expert advisory group to look more closely at this, and how to reduce or mitigate the differential effects on student learning.

We have ruled out the suggestion of regional grading – setting different grade boundaries for different regions of the country. That would create different kinds of unfairness because the experience within regions is not universal. Even in areas with high infection rates, there are schools where students have access to high quality remote learning, and some schools report not being behind at all.

Similarly, in less affected areas, there are students who will be further behind than many students in worse affected areas because they have been self-isolating with minimal remote learning in an environment that is not conducive to learning. And there will be students on the boundaries between regions who will have similar experiences but who would be graded via different grade boundaries. That is just not fair.

Some will ask why teacher assessment is not figuring more prominently. If teachers were to assess students and suggest a grade that students might have been expected to achieve in an exam, it still would not make up for that lost learning. And, as the summer of 2020 showed us, moderating teacher assessments fairly is difficult to do in a way that commands the confidence of parents and students.

Contingency arrangements

We welcome the government's commitment to GCSE, AS and A level exams going ahead next summer, and we have been working with officials at the Department for Education to look at the options open to government to mitigate for the impact of the pandemic.

The Department for Education has set out the details of these arrangements to make sure that as many students as possible can take exams and assessments.

Exam boards are working hard on these arrangements.

We will regulate exam boards to deliver a contingency exam series that will take place immediately after the main exam series – so, a little later than the main timetable – to give those students who were not able to take their exams the first time round another opportunity to do so. There are risks involved, but it is important to make sure that those who miss an exam through no fault of their own can still get a qualification and we think this is the fairest way.

We do not, for example, want students next year to have to put their lives on hold and wait until the autumn to take an exam. We want them to be able to progress to the next stage of their lives along with their peers.

The students we spoke to preferred the idea of a contingency exam series held after the main exam series to holding early exams. They felt it would give them as much time as possible to catch up on lost learning.

None of us has a crystal ball, and we cannot say what will happen for sure over the coming months, so we will put plans in place to respond to further disruption.

Mocks

Some have suggested a full series of mocks should be carried out in the spring so that students have a grade they can bank. But that is not really what mocks are for. Each school will use them in a slightly different way – sometimes they are used to find out what students do not know so that you can knuckle down and revise better before the actual exams. Some mocks are done very early in the year and administering them takes valuable time that could be used for teaching.

Students whose education has been the most disrupted need the most time to catch up. We are not sure they would appreciate early spring mocks.

Vocational, technical and other qualifications

A number of changes have already been made in vocational, technical and other qualifications to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic. A wide range of adaptions have been put in place and are being used, with many assessments already underway and continuing through the year. But a key principle is that students taking these qualifications are not disadvantaged compared to their peers taking GCSEs, AS and A levels, and we recognise that further changes may be needed.

We expect some awarding organisations will make further adaptations in light of the decision by the Department for Education to permit a reduction of the number of assessments for some Performance Table qualifications.

Where vocational, technical and other general qualifications have similar structures as GCSEs, AS and A levels and the same progression routes into higher and further education or into work, many of the measures discussed

above will be appropriate; for other qualifications, different adaptations will be suitable. Awarding organisations will need to decide what is most appropriate for their qualifications, and we are encouraging them to think as broadly as possible.

Conclusion

This is a complex picture with many thousands of qualifications being taken in the coming months. We will also look at what happens beyond 2021 and at the system for England in the longer term.

You can be sure that Ofqual will work with the government, exam boards, awarding organisations and the education sector to put arrangements for next summer in place, and to make sure students, parents and teachers are informed about the detail at the earliest possibility.

We will carry on listening. We will post updates on our website and carry out a programme of communications between now and next summer so that everyone has the information they need.

We are still in the middle of a pandemic. 2021 will again be an exceptional year but we are determined to achieve the best possible outcomes for each and every student.

HMCTS online event, 2 Dec 2020: An update on recovery in the civil, family and tribunals jurisdictions

This event provided an update on our recovery plans and progress in the civil, family and tribunals jurisdictions, and the unique challenges they are all facing.

Speakers included:

- Ben Burke-Davies, Senior Project Manager, CFT Recovery
- Simon Vowles, Deputy Director, Civil
- Adam Lennon, Deputy Director, Family
- Daniel Flury, Deputy Director, Tribunals
- Will Breame, Senior Project Manager, HMCTS COVID-19 response team

HMCTS webinar: An update on recovery in the civil, family and tribunals jurisdictions

If you attended the event, it would be great if you could spare a few minutes

to fill out our survey. This really helps us to improve these events for the future.

Smart survey

Please continue to check our events page for any upcoming HMCTS events.

Letter from Gavin Williamson to Glenys Stacey

On 2 December 2020, Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Education sent a letter to Dame Glenys Stacey, Ofqual's Acting Chief Regulator. This letter details the overall package of measures for GCSE, AS and A levels, vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications in 2021.

HRH The Prince of Wales telephone call with Prime Minister Imran Khan

World news story

HRH The Prince of Wales and Prime Minister Imran Khan spoke by telephone on Thursday. They reaffirmed the close and unique bonds between the two commonwealth nations including how the UK and Pakistan show the best of international friendship.

During the call HRH The Prince of Wales passed on his condolences for the

lives lost in Pakistan as a result of Covid-19 virus. The UK is providing essential support to some of the most vulnerable in Pakistan during the pandemic.

HRH The Prince of Wales and Prime Minister Khan agreed on the need for greater global co-operation in dealing with shared global challenges especially on Climate Change and protecting the environment.

The UK is hosting COP26 next year and HRH The Prince of Wales welcomed Pakistan's resolve on tackling the threat of Climate Change, reaffirming the UK's support for increased use of renewable energy in Pakistan.

For further information

For updates on the British High Commission, please follow our social media channels:

Contact
British High Commission, Islamabad
Tel: 0300 500 5306

Published 3 December 2020

UK scientists take a step closer to revealing origins of our galaxy

UK researchers, backed by funding from the UK Space Agency, produced a precise 3D map of our Milky Way galaxy using the cosmic treasure trove of data collected from the Gaia satellite, known as the 'Galaxy Surveyor'.

The cosmic data – co-ordinated by the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge – will enable astronomers, for the first time, to measure the mass of the galaxy by examining the acceleration of the Solar System. This ability will give us clues to the origins of our star system and could help confirm just how quickly the Universe has expanded since it began.

How does Gaia work?

- The mission carries two telescopes, which it scans across the Milky Way from a location about 1.5 million km from Earth.
- The telescopes' mirrors throw their captured light on to a huge, one-billion-pixel camera detector connected to a trio of instruments.
- It is this ultra-stable and supersensitive optical equipment that Gaia uses to pick out its sample of stars with extraordinary precision and confidence.

- The called-for specification was to get to know the brightest objects' coordinates down to an error of 1.94 degrees.
- This angle is equivalent to the size of a pound coin on the Moon as seen from Earth.
- In addition to their position and proper motion, the stars are having their physical properties analysed by Gaia.
- Its instruments are acquiring vital statistics like temperature and composition. These are markers needed to help determine the stars' ages

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

> The mysteries of the Milky Way and our Solar System have captured the imagination of generations of scientists and astronomers across the world – all eager to learn more about the origins of the Universe.
>
> Through this remarkable government-backed mission, UK scientists have taken us a giant leap closer to advancing our knowledge of how our Solar System began by painting the most detailed picture yet that could help to redefine astronomy as we know it.

Gaia is located at a Lagrange point, a gravitationally stable spot in the Sun-Earth system, called L2, which is located about 930,000 miles (1.5 million kilometres) from Earth in the opposite direction from the Sun. It has so far measured the positions and brightness of almost two billion stars, as well as detailing their positions, magnitudes and colours.

At Lagrange points, spacecraft can use a minimum of fuel to maintain the same location in space. Gaia is also far enough from Earth that the light emanating from our planet will not interfere with observations.

Caroline Harper, Head of Space Science at the UK Space Agency, said:

> For thousands of years, we have been preoccupied with noting and detailing the stars and their precise locations as they expanded humanity's understanding of our cosmos.
>
> Gaia has been staring at the heavens for the past seven years, mapping the positions and velocities of stars. Thanks to its telescopes we have in our possession today the most detailed billion-star 3D atlas ever assembled.

The information collected by the satellite is analysed back on Earth by the Gaia Data Processing and Analysis Consortium (DPAC), of which the UK is a major partner. The UK Space Agency, together with the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC), funds the Mullard Space Science Laboratory and the universities of Cambridge, Edinburgh, Leicester who make up the UK contribution to the group.

The data has been co-ordinated and prepared at the Institute of Astronomy in Cambridge and all of the mission's data has been made available to the public so they can help identify interesting phenomena in this massive cosmic treasure trove.

Dr Floor van Leeuwen of the Institute of Astronomy at the University of Cambridge, said:

> Gaia is measuring the distances of hundreds of millions of objects that are many thousands of light years away, at an accuracy equivalent to measuring the thickness of hair at a distance of more than 2000 kilometres. These data are one of the backbones of astrophysics, allowing us to forensically analyse our stellar neighbourhood, and tackle crucial questions about the origin and future of our galaxy.

The European Space Agency (ESA) launched its Gaia mission in 2013. The mission's name was originally an acronym for Global Astrometric Interferometer for Astrophysics, but interferometry is no longer the method by which the mission does its work.

Its goal was to update and extend the work of a previous satellite from the 1980s/90s called Hipparcos, which was an observatory that created the go-to Milky Way catalogue for its time.

This astonishing chart of our cosmic neighbourhood mapped the precise position, brightness, distance and proper motion (that sideways movement on the sky) of 100,000 stars.

With its first release of data in 2016, Gaia increased the number of known stars in the Milky Way twenty-fold.

The UK Space Agency contributes £374 million a year to ESA. This membership allows UK scientists to collaborate on a range of programmes, from Earth Observation satellites and Mars Rovers, to advanced telecommunications and commercial applications. The UK Space Agency has already contributed £19 million to Gaia on processing and analysing the findings and STFC has invested an additional £2.4 million into supporting the catalogues derived from the data.