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News story

Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals

Our decisions following consultation on the exceptional arrangements for awarding calculated grades in GCSEs, AS and A levels this summer; and proposals for an autumn exam series.

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Ofqual (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual>)



Students will be awarded calculated grades in GCSEs, AS and A levels, the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) and Advanced Extension Award in maths (AEA) this summer, after exams were cancelled in England this summer to help fight the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Eighty two percent of the 12,623 respondents to our consultation on this summer's exceptional arrangements agreed with our proposal to adopt the grading process into our regulatory framework this year. We have today, Friday 22 May, published our analysis and key decisions (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-exam-grading-and-assessment-in-2020>), and updated our information for Heads of Centres (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/awarding-qualifications-in-summer-2020>).

An important feature of the overall arrangements this summer is the planned additional exam series in the autumn, which will provide an opportunity for students unable to receive a calculated grade, and others who would like the opportunity to improve their grade, to take an exam. Having worked closely with the Department for Education and exam boards, and listened to the views of groups representing students, school and college leaders, we are also setting out for consultation today our proposals on the arrangements for this additional exam series (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-an-additional-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series-in-autumn-2020>).

Our consultation includes proposals to require exam boards to offer exams in all subjects, and to offer the full suite of papers as are normally offered in other summer exam series. Because of the current uncertainty about when schools and colleges will re-open fully and the public health restrictions that may be in place, we are not consulting on the exact dates when the exams should take place. If possible, we envisage that AS and A level

exams should take place in October and GCSE exams in November, with the exact timing to be confirmed by us, having taken advice from government, the exam boards and groups representing schools, colleges, teachers and students.

The extent to which students will have been able to complete any non-exam assessment (NEA) before schools and colleges closed on 20 March will vary by centre and subject. Similarly, how far it will be possible for students to undertake new non-exam assessments in the autumn will also vary. To be fair to students in these circumstances, we want to explore through our consultation views about NEA. Based on our discussions with exam boards and school and college leaders we are proposing that, with the exception of art and design, grades awarded in the autumn should be based only on students' performance in their exams, with no non-exam assessments. We would welcome feedback on this proposal before we decide on the arrangements for the autumn. The consultation is open until Monday 8 June 2020.

Sally Collier, Chief Regulator, Ofqual, said:

In the unprecedented circumstances we face this summer, these exceptional arrangements are the fairest way of making sure students have the grades they need in time to progress to further study or employment. It is important that students; their parents, carers and teachers; and others who rely on these qualifications, such as universities and employers, have had an opportunity to feed back views. We are also today inviting anyone affected to tell us what they think about our proposals for the additional autumn exam series.

As schools and colleges prepare for the important task of submitting their centre assessment grades and rank order information, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their professionalism and support in making these judgements objectively and fairly for their students.

Summer arrangements - consultation decisions

Who should receive a calculated grade

To give students, schools and colleges certainty at the earliest opportunity, we prioritised and published earlier in May our decisions on 2 proposals about who should receive a calculated grade. This confirmed that students in year 10 and below entered for exams this summer could receive calculated grades. Private candidates can also receive calculated grades if the head of the centre which entered them is confident they can submit a centre assessment grade for the student and rank them alongside their other students.

Standardising centre assessment grades

To make sure grades are as fair as possible, exam boards will standardise centre assessment grades using a statistical model which will include the expected national outcomes for this year's students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and previous results of the school or college.

Because these arrangements have had to be put in place very quickly due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it would have been impossible to provide school and college staff with national training to support them in making standardised judgements. As such, it is highly likely that all centres will see some adjustment, in at least one subject, to their centre assessment grades, however carefully they have made their judgements. Such adjustments are in the interests of fairness to all students because they will ensure, as far as possible, that individual centres have not been too severe or too generous in comparison with other centres.

We set out in our consultation a number of proposals about the standardisation model. In light of the feedback we received, we have decided:

- to adopt the aims we set out for model, with which 89% of respondents agreed
- that the standardisation process will place more weight on a centre's historical performance in a subject than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will result in students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020
- that because of the risk of unfairness, the model will not seek to reflect any trends in improvement or deterioration in a centre's outcomes in a subject over previous years (a centre's trajectory)
- to publish further guidance to support centres in making objective judgements, informed by the published literature on the potential for bias in teachers' judgements and input from a number of groups with an interest and expertise in equalities. The majority of people who responded (64%) agreed with our proposal not to modify individual centre rank orders to account for possible bias. We believe this would lead to arbitrary changes to the rank orders provided by centres, because it would be impossible to know the degree of any bias in centre assessment grades and rankings

Appealing calculated grades

We are committed to doing all that we can to make sure students are not disadvantaged by these unprecedented circumstances, including allowing for an appeal where appropriate. We asked a number of questions about our proposed arrangements for appeals this summer, noting that the usual process – which pre-supposes exams and marking have taken place - cannot happen simply because there are no exam scripts to review or remark. As a result:

- we have confirmed that a student who had evidence of bias or discrimination would be able to raise this with their centre; an exam board could investigate such evidence as indicating malpractice
- we have also decided that, as now, centres must have a procedure which allows students to request that a review is conducted of the centre's decision not to appeal to an exam board
- appeals should be allowed where a centre believes it has made an error when submitting its information; or similarly, if the centre believes an exam board made a mistake when calculating, assigning or communicating a grade

We have given serious consideration as to whether a student could challenge their centre assessment grades and position in their centre's rank order. Responses to our proposals on these issues were mixed and varied by the background of the respondent. For example, the majority of teachers who responded agreed with our proposal that we should not provide for a review or appeal process on the basis of a centre's judgement; whereas the opposite was true for students, parents and carers. We recognise the strength of feeling amongst students, and have weighed carefully whether such an appeal could work fairly. On balance, we have decided it would not be in the interests of all students or the fairness of the arrangements overall because:

- the appeal would have to be undertaken by someone better placed than the student's teachers to judge the grade they would likely have received if the exams had taken place – in the unique circumstances of this summer we do not believe there is any such person
- in addition, if an appeal was to be undertaken before the centre assessment grade and rank order information was submitted to the exam boards, the appeal would require students to have access to the information their school or college submitted. Many teacher respondents have told us, and we agree, that the overall reliability of this year's approach would be compromised if information about centre assessment grades and rank orders was disclosed before being submitted to the exam boards. 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 have listened to suggestions about how we could take into account evidence from a centre that it believes shows exceptional circumstances which justify changes in how the standardisation process should apply to its students. Specifically, where a centre can demonstrate that there has been a significant change in the demographic make-up of its 2020 cohort in a subject which indicates students would have performed better

than in previous years, and that using the normal standardisation process as set out would disadvantage this year's students. Proposals to allow this form of appeal may raise problems of either unreliability or unfairness. An appeals mechanism that allowed some centres an unreasonable advantage over others would not be consistent with operating a fair process. However, given the importance of the issue and strength of feeling we are conducting further work to establish if there are reasonable and fair grounds for an appeal of this sort.

We recognise there are concerns that the exceptional arrangements for providing results this summer are less fair than exams, and we have set out how we will address these concerns as far as we can. As many respondents have agreed, these arrangements are fairest in the circumstances and, importantly, will allow most students to progress to the next stage of their lives without further disruption.

Other qualifications

We have published the outcomes of our consultation on vocational, technical and other general qualifications (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-assessment-and-grading-in-2020>), confirming the exceptional arrangements for awarding these qualifications this summer.

Infographic of the awarding process

Infographic: Process for awarding GCSEs, AS and A levels summer 2020
(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/887041/6614-4_Infographic_-_Process_for_awarding_GCSEs_AS_and_A_levels_summer_2020.pdf)

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