



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

3 December 2020

To all MPs

Dear Colleague,

Arrangements for exams and accountability in England in 2021

In October, I announced that exams in 2021 will go ahead. Most AS, A levels and GCSEs will start three weeks later than normal, giving schools extra time for teaching and learning. I recognise that young people have faced unprecedented disruption to their education and that students in different parts of the country have experienced this to differing degrees.

Exams are the best way for students to demonstrate what they have learnt and what they can do. Today, therefore, I am announcing the next stage of our package of measures to ensure that exams successfully take place next summer, so that students get the qualifications they deserve.

Together with Ofqual, we have worked closely with a range of stakeholders including unions, heads/principals, exam boards, HE and FE bodies, students, parents, and equalities organisations to ensure that exams next year will be safe and as fair as possible for all students across a range of different scenarios.

Adaptations to exams in an exceptional year

In recognition of the challenges students have faced, Ofqual has decided that grading for 2021 GCSE, AS and A level exams will be aligned with the overall standards from 2020, meaning students this year will not be disadvantaged compared to their 2020 peers. The variability in Vocational and Technical qualifications (VTQ) means there is not a one size fits all solution to grading but Ofqual is working with Awarding Organisations to ensure their approaches to grading mean that students taking VTQs and other general qualifications are not disadvantaged.

To help students find the prospect of taking exams next summer less daunting, we considered a range of ways exams could be adapted, allowing teaching and revision to be more focused and to imbue a sense of fairness, without undermining their validity. Adaptations will involve providing advance information about the topic

areas to be covered in the papers (to be provided early in the spring term) and, for some subjects, exam support materials will be provided.

For Vocational and Technical Qualifications, Ofqual has been working with Awarding Organisations on a range of adaptations. I am today confirming that, beyond these adaptations already in place, there will be greater flexibilities for VTQs on performance tables, including permitting a reduction in the number of assessments to be taken. This will free up time to focus on teaching students all the knowledge and skills they need to progress to the next stage of their lives.

I am also establishing an expert advisory group, to monitor the variation in the impact of the pandemic on students' education and to make recommendations to government on how to account for this.

These measures are designed to support students and teachers to have a fair chance to prepare for and succeed in exams during this extraordinary year. It is our intention for as many students as possible to be able to sit exams in the usual way. However, we have planned for all eventualities and I have today written to the acting Chief Regulator to ask Ofqual to continue to work closely with the department and the exam boards in putting a full range of contingency measures in place.

Contingency measures for exams 2021

We are exploring how we can use testing to release students who may otherwise need to be self-isolating, so that students can sit their exams safely. If a student legitimately misses an exam next year due to self-isolation or sickness, but had completed a sufficient proportion of their qualification, then the existing special consideration process will be used to award a grade.

If a student legitimately misses all their exam papers in a subject, they will have opportunity to sit a contingency paper held shortly after the summer series, in early July. For the likely small minority of students who might legitimately miss the main series and the contingency paper for a subject, they will have an opportunity to be awarded a grade based on a validated teacher assessment. Details will follow early in the new year.

Primary assessment

To recognise the challenges that primary schools are also facing, primary assessments in summer 2021 will focus on the phonics screening check, teacher assessment in English reading, writing and mathematics at key stage 1 and tests in English reading and mathematics and teacher assessment in English writing at key stage 2.

The key stage 1 tests in English reading and mathematics and the English grammar, punctuation and spelling test at key stage 1 and 2 will be removed for one year. There will also be no requirement to undertake and report on science teacher assessment at both key stages. In addition, the introduction of the multiplication tables check will be postponed by a further year, whilst still enabling schools to use it on an optional basis.

We are also enabling schools to take a more flexible approach to the administration of the key stage 2 tests and phonics screening check by extending the original timetable variation windows by a further week until 26 May and 25 June respectively.

These measures will help to understand the impact of pupils' lost time in education and enable support to be provided to those pupils and schools that need it most. It will also provide vital information to parents and assist with pupils' transition to secondary schools.

Performance tables

We will temporarily change performance tables next year to provide a transparent set of information for parents. We will not be publishing the normal measures based on test, exam and assessment data in those tables. Instead, we will publish data on: the subjects students have taken, how well schools and colleges support students to their next destination, and attendance data with relevant context to take account of the impact of Covid-19. DfE will also publish national and regional data on 2021 exams, tests and assessments.

School and college level exam, test and assessment data will be produced by DfE and made available to Ofsted, as a useful starting point for discussions about school and college performance in 2020/21, and to schools and colleges themselves to support improvement.

I believe that parents with an interest in a particular school or college, either because their child currently attends this school or because they are thinking of applying for a place for their child, have a right to information about exam, test and assessment results in 2021. Parents will continue to be informed of their own child's results, and test, examination, and assessment data from summer 2021 will be available from schools and colleges directly.

Remote Education

The government has reviewed remote education guidance and published updated expectations to provide further clarity for schools, parents and pupils. Primary schools will be expected to provide a minimum of three hours a day on average of remote education, with secondary schools expected to provide at least four hours' worth. The number of hours set has been carefully considered and was informed by the department's work with schools themselves.

Schools will also be expected to frequently check and provide feedback on pupils' work, at least weekly, and inform parents immediately where engagement is a concern. So that pupils and their parents know what to expect from their school if they need to self-isolate or local restrictions require them to remain at home, we also intend to ask schools to publish information about their remote education offer on their websites during the spring term. Further details will be announced in due course.

Ofsted inspections

Ofsted's routine, graded school inspections will remain suspended for the spring term, but will resume, in a carefully considered way, from the summer term. In the meantime, Ofsted will carry out supportive monitoring inspections, primarily to schools currently judged inadequate and those with two or more requires improvement judgements, with Ofsted having some discretion to visit some schools with a single requires improvement grade. These inspections will aim to point schools in the right direction and to sources of support.

All MP meeting to discuss exams and accountability

I recognise that you may have questions over the details of these plans. Nick Gibb MP will be hosting an online Q&A session on Monday 7 December from 1 – 2pm relating to exams 2021 and he invites your thoughts and questions. Please contact Scott Mann's Parliamentary Office for a link to the meeting and please submit any questions to them by noon on Friday.

These steps, combined with the measures that have already been taken – moving exams back by three weeks and the changes in assessment content announced in August – will mean exams can take place in 2021 in a way that gives students confidence that in this extraordinary year, they are able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills and progress to the next stage in their lives.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education