



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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To all MPs

Consultation on alternatives to exams in 2021

Dear Colleague

I am writing to you to provide an update on the latest steps we are taking in response to the impact of the pandemic on exams this academic year. I know this is an important issue to all of us and to your constituents, and I wish to reiterate my thanks to all the parents, carers, teachers, education staff, social workers and others who are working hard to keep children and young people safe and learning.

The course of the pandemic required government to take additional measures to control the spread of the virus. 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. This is necessary to reduce transmission and limit progress of the virus. We also recognise that the impact of the pandemic varies between regions, between schools and colleges within a region, and from student to student according to their personal circumstances.

Given this further disruption we have regrettably had to review our plans for exams this summer, as I announced to you in the House of Commons on 6 January. We cannot guarantee that all students will be able to fairly sit their exams this summer and it is my firm policy position that alternative arrangements are needed to award qualifications. Together with Ofqual, we must therefore now deliver an alternative approach to ensure young people still receive a grade that supports them to progress to the next stage of their lives.

Joint consultation with Ofqual

My department and Ofqual had already worked up a range of contingency options. We have now issued a [joint consultation](#) to seek views on alternative assessment arrangements for GCSE, AS and A levels and propositions for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) to seek to ensure that students taking these qualifications are not disadvantaged in comparison to their peers.

This process focuses on Ofqual-regulated qualifications which are primarily taken in England, and by only a small number of students in the devolved administrations,

particularly Northern Ireland. We are discussing the implications of the proposed arrangements with the devolved administrations as we consult.

To provide certainty to your constituents and to the sector, balancing the need both to engage widely and to reach conclusions quickly, the consultation will run for a fortnight. I am keen to seek the views of teachers, school and college leaders, students, parents, and others involved in education, both through the written consultation and direct engagement with stakeholder groups.

GCSE, AS, and A level exams

For GCSE, AS and A level, it is my firm policy position that students' results should be determined based on teachers' assessment of their performance, informed by a breadth of evidence. The joint consultation considers how we can support teachers to do this, including whether the use of externally set tasks or papers to support their judgements should be required or recommended and what broader evidence should be used. We will seek to minimise the additional burdens for teachers and schools and colleges created by this need for evidence.

It is my view that students should be assessed based on what they have learnt, rather than against content they have not had a chance to study, and that this should be balanced against the need to ensure good enough coverage of the curriculum for all students to support successful progress. It is also my view that a teacher's final judgement ought to be given as late as possible in the academic year to maximise teaching time.

The consultation includes proposals for quality assurance of teachers' assessments. This will require careful guidance, training and support for schools and colleges. It is my position that there should also be external checks in place to support fairness and consistency between different institutions, and that any changes should be the exception and based on human decisions, not an automatic process or algorithm.

The joint consultation seeks views on the options for private candidates to ensure there is a clear and accessible route for them to be assessed and receive a grade; and on options for any student to request a review and appeal their grade if they do not believe their grade reflects the standard of their work.

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications that are not GCSE, AS, or A levels

It is my view that it is no longer viable for written exams for some vocational and technical qualifications to go ahead in February and March. The consultation proposes that written exams for some vocational and technical qualifications scheduled for April onwards should also not go ahead. We are consulting on which qualifications should be in scope, and the alternative assessment arrangements that should be put in place where exams are not taken. We want to ensure fairness for all students and propose that the arrangements put in place for these qualifications are similar to those for GCSEs, AS and A levels.

It is also my view that internal assessment should continue, and should take place remotely for VTQs and other general qualifications wherever possible, whilst

recognising that the level of disruption suffered might mean that not all internal assessment can be completed by all students. We expect that if where internal assessment is completed, this will be included as evidence when deciding your results. Like with GCSEs, AS, and A levels, the DfE and Ofqual are consulting on the approach for vocational qualifications.

For other general qualifications that are not GCSEs, AS or A levels, such as Core Maths, Pre-U and the International Baccalaureate, the awarding approach should be similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels. Where possible, I expect Functional Skills Qualifications assessments to continue to proceed in line with public health guidelines, including remotely. Where this is not possible, alternative arrangements should be put in place to award results.

There are a number of qualifications where a practical demonstration of occupational skills is needed. It is not possible to award these qualifications on the basis of teacher judgement alone, because often there are health and safety or regulatory elements where assessment is critical. I expect that assessments for these qualifications should continue wherever possible, subject to public health guidance, so that students are able to progress to the next stage of their lives. However, in some cases these may need to be deferred. The consultation seeks views on this approach.

I have provided further detail on my views on the consultation in my [letter to Ofqual](#).

All MP meeting to discuss alternatives to exams

I recognise that you may have questions on the details of these plans. Nick Gibb MP and Gillian Keegan MP will be hosting an online Q&A session on Tuesday 26th January from 9.30am relating to the consultation, and they invite your thoughts and questions. Please contact Scott Mann MP's Parliamentary Office for a link to the meeting and submit any questions to them by 12pm on Friday 22nd January. I would also welcome written feedback to the consultation, if colleagues are so inclined.

Thank you for the support and feedback you have provided so far. I look forward to continuing to work together to ensure that all students are able to progress fairly.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a large, stylized initial 'G'.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education