

## **Position statement on qualifications in 2020/21**

The awarding of qualifications was impacted significantly by the difficult but necessary decision to cancel examinations in the summer of 2020. As the NASUWT has [noted](#), given the significant reliance of qualification systems across the UK on examinations, all sensible options for awarding qualifications in such circumstances inevitably involved difficult and unavoidable trade-offs and challenges. Alongside the NASUWT, all credible and informed commentators on the awarding of qualifications last summer recognised that there are no straightforward or ready-made solutions to awarding qualifications in the middle of a global pandemic.

Nevertheless, the NASUWT has [called for lessons to be learned](#) from last summer's examination season and so that all possible steps can be taken to minimise disruption in 2020/21, ensure the safety of candidates and the workforce and allow young people to receive awards that reflect their progress and achievement validly and reliably.

The NASUWT continues to engage with governments, administrations and regulators across the UK on arrangements for qualifications during the current academic year. While the NASUWT has pressed for clarity on qualifications to be provided urgently, it is also critical that decisions are taken on a fully informed basis and are subject to meaningful and timely consultation. The principles guiding the NASUWT's engagement with relevant authorities on these matters are summarised below.

### **Exercise caution in delaying examination dates**

Since the partial closure of schools in March, teachers and school leaders have demonstrated their professionalism and creativity in devising and implementing a range of innovative remote and blended learning offers. However, it is clear that many pupils due to enter qualifications in 2020/21 were not able to engage with subject content during this period to the extent that would have been possible had the provision of on-site education not been disrupted.

Proposals that the starting date for examinations should be delayed in order to create additional teaching time to address missed subject content are understandable. While the NASUWT would not rule out such measures entirely, it is important to recognise that they would have potentially significant adverse implications for learners and staff in schools and colleges that may outweigh the relatively limited benefits that they might provide.

In particular, the NASUWT has noted that any feasible delay in examination dates would be likely to create very little additional teaching time in practice and would, therefore, make a marginal difference to addressing the consequences of lost teaching time. It would, however, be highly disruptive and would not be consistent with the ambition of governments and administrations across the UK that educational provision should return to as close a position to normality as possible.

Delaying the start of examinations in this way would also reduce the amount of time that is created in schools when pupils are no longer receiving timetabled teaching during the examination period. This time is used in schools to undertake important activities that contribute to the quality of educational provision, including curricular development and planning provision for pupils due to enter qualifications in the following academic year. Reducing this time would impact and undermine schools' efforts to secure educational recovering from the implications of COVID-19 and could have

profoundly detrimental implications for the workload and wellbeing of teachers and school leaders, adding to the extraordinary pressures that they will continue to face as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

A reduced window for marking may have adverse impacts on awarding bodies' internal quality control measures and may make marking a less attractive option for potential markers, given the reduced timescale within which they and other staff would have to complete awarding-related processes. It should be noted in this context that as the clear majority of markers are serving teachers, they are likely to continue to experience significant workload pressures and may be deterred from taking up work as markers if the process is made less manageable for them. A constrained timescale for the completion of these processes couple place the resilience of the qualifications system at risk.

### **Prioritise mitigation measures focused on the content and structure of examinations**

It is critical that the qualifications system is able to take effective account of the disruption that the partial closure of schools has had on ability of candidates to engage with the full range of subject content. Amendments to the structure and content of examinations and other assessments offer a particularly effective mitigation measure. Such amendments should be designed to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in terms of the organisation of learning to address the implications of the disruption to learning.

Such approaches include widening question choice and increasing optional questions where possible, thereby minimising the risk that questions and tasks would cover content that candidates has not been able to cover in their studies as a result of COVID-related disruption. Some UK jurisdictions have adopted this approach in a limited range of subjects in 2020/21 although it is clear that there is greater scope for use of this approach to be broadened. While there are legitimate reservations about this approach on educational grounds, difficult policy choices have still to be made in the extraordinary circumstances in which the education system is operating if the greater disadvantages of alternative options, such as delaying the start of examinations, are to be avoided.

Other potentially helpful amendments can be made to the structure of qualifications to reduce pressures on teaching time. For example, notwithstanding the importance of fieldwork and many non-examined assessment elements of some qualifications, it may be possible temporarily to reduce their use given the significant demands they place on curricular time and the inconsistency of some activities with COVID-19 control measures.

### **Build-in resilience to any resurgence of the virus and its implications**

Current official assumptions across the UK are that candidates will be able to access a full suite of examinations and other assessments next summer, albeit in amended form in some cases. While it is sensible to develop plans on this basis, it is also critical to ensure that contingency plans are in place to address circumstances where some or all candidates are unable to access assessments as a result of further measures that have to be taken to tackle COVID-19. Open engagement with stakeholders should begin urgently to consider how such an eventuality might be addressed. This engagement should explore, among other issues: acceptable options for making awards without candidates sitting examinations; the role, if any, statistical standardisation and the provision of centre assessed

grades and rank orders should play in awarding; how an appeals mechanism should be established; and the degree of emphasis that should be placed on maintaining qualification standards over time.

Even in circumstances where candidates are able to access examinations and assessments in 2020/21, it is likely that some candidates may have experienced greater disruption to their learning than others as a result of the varying incidence of local lockdowns and outbreaks in individual schools across the country. Awarding systems will need to take account of such differences in experience if awards are to be made on as fair and consistent a basis as possible. Circumstances where candidates' access to on-site learning has been disrupted also highlight the need to ensure that arrangements are in place to address the needs of children and young people who face barriers to engaging fully in remote and blended learning. This consideration highlights the requirement on governments and administrations to step-up efforts to support learners who do not have access to the equipment and reliable internet connectivity required to access some forms of provision.

### **Addressing pressures on teachers and school leaders**

The NASUWT has remained clear that approaches to addressing missed subject content by, for example, seeking to extend the length of the school day or reduce holiday periods would be unsustainable and would place intolerable additional pressures on a workforce that is continuing to face unprecedented challenges. The Union will continue to represent the interests of its members robustly in any circumstances where such an approach is being contemplated and press governments and administrations across the UK to take all necessary steps to protect teachers and school leaders from such practices.

### **Ensure that any examinations and assessments are undertaken in a COVID-secure way**

Where it is decided that examinations and other assessments should go ahead, it is critical that they are undertaken in a way that ensures those undertaking and overseeing them can remain safe. Such action includes ensuring that centres undertake a dedicated risk assessment for examinations and assessments, briefing those participating in examinations and assessments on COVID control measures, particularly in respect of those undertaken in centres with which they are unfamiliar, and that arrangements take full account of any equalities implications for those involved, including candidates and staff with protected characteristics.

### **Future developments**

The NASUWT will continue to press for these principles to be reflected in policy and practice across the UK and will ensure that members are kept fully up to date with developments. The issues associated with examinations and qualifications are complex and have profound professional and employment implications for teachers and school leaders. Feedback from members on issues of concern and, critically, on the choices that governments and administrations should make remains central to the NASUWT's ability to represent the views and interests of the profession effectively and members are encouraged to provide feedback by email to [qualifications@mail.nasuwt.org.uk](mailto:qualifications@mail.nasuwt.org.uk).