PROPOSAL FOR AWARDING GCSE, AS AND A-LEVEL GRADES IN 2021

2 October 2020

Context

Students taking GCSEs, AS and A-levels in 2021 face a unique set of challenges. They missed out on several months of face-to-face learning in the previous academic year. The need for schools and colleges to implement wide-ranging health protection measures this year is impacting the ability of many to provide teaching as usual. And ongoing uncertainty around the development of the pandemic means it's possible that some, many or all students may not be able to physically sit exams in summer 2021.

Furthermore, these challenges are not impacting equally on all students. Some were able to continue learning from home much more effectively than others during the spring and summer, with significant variation in access to laptops and quiet places to study. Some are facing significant ongoing disruption, including requirements to self-isolate, while others may be able to go into school or college with no further disruption.

This differential impact is likely to further disadvantage already disadvantaged students for a number of reasons. Students from lower socio-economic groups are less likely to have access to laptops or other devices to use at home, and less likely to have quiet spaces in which to study. Poorer communities, as well as those with significant BAME populations, are also suffering disproportionately from Covid-19, meaning students in those communities are more likely to experience ongoing disruption to their learning.

It is therefore essential that the government, Ofqual and the awarding organisations find ways to:

1. fully understand what happened with exams and grading in 2020, to ensure we learn lessons from this in determining plans for 2021
2. prioritise students due to take exams in the test and trace process
3. ensure that all students due to take exams in 2021 are able to be awarded grades, and that these are as accurate as possible, even if they are not able to physically sit those exams
4. recognise, as much as possible, the different impact the public health crisis has had on different students
5. find ways to ensure the grades awarded to students in 2021 can be compared appropriately with those awarded to students in other years, without disadvantaging individual pupils or centres

Progress to date

Ofqual's consultation response on proposed changes to general qualifications in 2021 confirmed welcome, but limited, changes to GCSEs, AS and A-levels this year. These are:

- some increased optionality in GCSE history and ancient history
- some increased optionality in GCSE English literature
- removing the requirement to undertake a field trip in GCSE, AS and A-level geography
- removing the requirement or changing the assessment of practical activities in subjects including the sciences, music, PE, drama and modern foreign languages

We are aware that the government, Ofqual and the awarding organisations are currently considering further changes, to address the issues raised above. This paper is intended to contribute to that thinking. While we focus here on GCSEs, AS and A-levels, we believe the same principles apply to vocational and technical qualifications.

Issue 1 – learning from what happened in 2020

Our organisations have repeatedly called for an independent enquiry into how grades were awarded in 2020. We are aware of a number of current investigations into this issue, but we do not believe that these plans go far enough in properly exploring what happened, to ensure that we learn lessons from this in planning what to do in 2021. Given the urgency with which decisions about 2021 are needed, some of these may have to be made ahead of any formal enquiry, but our view is that it is still essential that an impartial investigaton takes place.

Issue 2 – prioritising students taking exams for Covid testing

We hope that the current problems with the test and trace system will be rapidly resolved. In the meantime, we would urge the government to prioritise students due to sit exams imminently, i.e. those in Years 11 and 13, for testing, along with education staff. This would not entirely solve the problem, as it wouldn't help Year 11 and 13 students who are having to self-isolate as a result of other members of their household displaying Covid symptoms or testing positive, but it would be a step in the right direction.

Issue 3 – ensuring accurate grades can be awarded to all students

The government is right, in our view, to pursue a 'Plan A' which would enable all students to sit exams in summer 2021. Students in Year 11 and 13 are already more than halfway through their courses, and must be enabled to complete those courses as planned, and gain the awards they deserve. As these qualifications are mainly designed to be assessed by final examination, it is right that these exams should go ahead if possible.

However, it is also essential to recognise that some, many or all students may not be able to sit their exams this summer. It is highly likely that some students will have to self-isolate in May and June 2021 due to local or national outbreaks. These students must be able to gain their qualifications they deserve.

In addition, some students may suffer very significant disruption to their studies this year if they are out of school or college for several periods because of illness, self-isolation or local closures.

Contingency plans for students who find themselves in either of these situations must be confirmed as soon as possible. This is urgent for two reasons. Firstly, students need reassurance that their hard work will be recognised, and that they will be able to progress to the next stage of their education or careers. Secondly, if these contingency plans involve any form of consistent teacher assessment, schools and colleges need to start doing this now, to ensure it is as accurate as possible.

Our view is that these contingency plans could involve the following:

- The development of 'reserve papers' for students unable to sit exams on a particular date, but able to sit them shortly afterwards (e.g. as a result of having to self-isolate for fourteen days over the date of the exam).
- Formal staged assessments, undertaken by all students within school or college, under exam conditions. In order to ensure consistency across schools and colleges, the exam boards could either develop these staged assessments themselves, or signpost centres to acceptable pre-existing assessments that could be used for this purpose.
- The results of these staged assessments, along with other agreed evidence such as coursework, to be used by schools and colleges to determine grades assessed by centres for students, as a back-up for those unable to sit exams, or for those who have suffered very significant disruption to their learning.
- A robust, valid and fair process to be developed by the exam boards to moderate these grades assessed by centres, to ensure consistency across the system
- A workload impact assessment to ensure that plans are sustainable, recognising that teachers and school leaders are already working under extraordinary levels of pressure.

Implementation of these plans would, we believe, enable students to be rigorously and consistently assessed, whether or not they are able to sit exams. This would also provide the government with a scalable solution, with robust grades, submitted by centres, used for as many or as few students as necessary.

Issue 4 – ensuring grades are as fair as possible

We need to ensure not only that students sit exams or receive a robust grade assessed by centre, but that the grades they receive are as fair as possible, and recognise the different experiences they may have had this year.

There are a number of mechanisms that could be used to attempt to achieve this. These include:

- reducing content in qualifications
- introducing greater optionality, to enable students to choose to answer questions on, say, three out of five possible topics
- moving the timing of exams later, to give students more time to 'catch up'

We recognise Ofqual's decision not to remove any content from these qualifications, as doing so may disadvantage learners who have been taught material in different sequences.

Greater optionality in all qualifications is therefore, in our view, essential. We recognise there may be unintended consequences of optionality, which may impact particularly on disadvantaged learners. However, this can be mitigated with intelligent assessment redesign (such as splitting exam papers into separate topics, and asking schools and colleges to only distribute to students questions on topics they have been taught). For subjects where study of the full specification is needed for future study of the subject, the government can still require key knowledge, concepts and skills to be taught, without requiring all of these to be formally assessed.

We agree that moving the timing of exams back may be a necessary mitigation (providing results can be issued as normal) in order to provide a small amount of extra learning time. However, we must not lead ourselves to believe this will make any significant difference to the different learning experiences students have had this year, as this additional time will obviously benefit all students. Any resulting compression of the exam period could also have significant negative consequences on student performance and wellbeing, which may negate the possible benefits.

We are concerned that the changes Ofqual has already announced (as outlined in the 'Progress to date' section above) amount to merely 'tinkering around the edges' of recognising and accounting for the different experience students have had. Our view is that greater optionality should be introduced across the board, to enable students whose education has been significantly disrupted still to demonstrate their ability. Finding ways to do this without introducing confusion, and potentially further disadvantaging some students, cannot be beyond the skill and experience of those designing our exams. In fact this is already being implemented in other jurisdictions, including Wales – a development which could disadvantage English students having to study and revise for more content than their Welsh peers.

Issue 5 – find ways to ensure grades are comparable with other years, without disadvantaging individual pupils or centres

A central tenet of our exam system is that the grades awarded to students in one year can be compared with those awarded in other years. The system of 'comparable outcomes' is designed to ensure this is the case. While the use of comparable outcomes does serve this purpose, it also leads to a number of undesirable consequences, including effectively rationing the number of students who can receive a particular grade. Our organisations have raised concerns about the use of comparable outcomes in 'normal' years, and this is a discussion to which we will wish to return.

In 2021, the issues with comparable outcomes are even greater than is usually the case. Not only have students this year had very different experiences both from each other and from previous years, but the 2020 results are significantly higher than other years as a result of the decision to award the higher of a student's centre-assessed or calculated grade.

This raises two key questions:

- Should comparable outcomes be used this year at all?
- If comparable outcomes are used, should this year's results be 'pegged' to 2020 or 2019?

There are no easy answers to these questions. This is a highly complex and difficult issue, and any solution would need to be thoroughly explored to guard against unintended consequences. Abandoning comparable outcomes without careful consideration of the alternatives risks destabilising the system and devaluing students' achievements. Pegging results to 2020 carries similar risks, and punts the problem further down the road. Pegging results to 2019 risks further disadvantaging students whose education has been most disrupted, by making it harder for them to attain the grades they might, in a 'normal' year, have been capable of achieving.

These questions highlight the inter-related nature of the five issues raised in this paper. It is our view that, if only the minimal changes to 2021 currently promised take place, it would be unconscionable for comparable outcomes to apply as normal, and for students' grades to be awarded as they were in 2019, using the relevant reference year in each subject. However, implementing the more substantial changes we recommend here would, in our view, create a much fairer system, and go some way towards enabling students this year to demonstrate, and be rewarded for, what they have achieved despite the difficult circumstances.

If these broader changes are made, in such a way that allows the vast majority of students a fair opportunity to demonstrate what they are capable of, our view is that comparable outcomes could be retained. Grade boundaries could be set using the usual comparable outcomes process as a starting point, and then altered by a number of marks to increase the percentage achieving that grade to an agreed level. That level could be somewhere between what was seen in 2019 and 2020. This would retain a degree of comparability and limit the extent of grade 'inflation' permitted, whilst also recognising the disrupted learning students have experienced this year.

Ultimately, it is crucial that the system is fair to all individual students and centres, and that we do not lose sight of this when thinking about the needs of the system.

Summary of recommendations

In summary, we believe that the government/Ofqual must take the following actions as a matter of urgency:

1. Commission an independent review of what happened with exam grading in 2020, in order to learn from this when planning what to do in 2021 (while not allowing this to delay time-critical decision-making).
2. Prioritise symptomatic students in key exam years for Covid tests to reduce ongoing disruption to exam classes' learning.
3. Publish contingency plans as soon as possible to outline how students who are unable to sit exams in the summer, or whose education has been very significantly disrupted, will nevertheless receive robust, reliable grades. This could include formal staged assessment arrangements and a robust fallback centre-assessment process.
4. Review the assessment of all general qualifications to allow for greater optionality in most subjects, and consider changes to the design of assessments to ensure any issues with this are addressed.
5. If the above actions are taken, retain comparable outcomes in 2021, with results ideally pegged to a point between the grades achieved by students in 2019 and 2020.