

Department for Education.

Guidance to support the summer 2021 exams.

Introduction

On 12 October 2020, the Secretary of State for Education announced that all exams across England will go ahead in the summer of 2021. This was reconfirmed on 3 December. The government is clear that exams are the fairest and most accurate way to measure attainment.

The government has engaged widely with the sector over the last 6 weeks in considering the range of scenarios which might affect students' ability to sit exams. Plans have been developed with Ofqual and the awarding organisations at a national, local and individual student level to address any potential disruption.

We recognise students have experienced unprecedented disruption to their education this year and this disruption has not fallen equally across the country.

To ensure students have the confidence they will be treated fairly and that exams can take place safely, the following measures have been agreed.

Supporting the delivery of 2021 exams

Most exams have been moved back 3 weeks, with the main exam series taking place from 7 June to 2 July 2021 to create more teaching time. See the [GCSE, GCE AS and A level timetable](#) for more information.

We are currently exploring how we can use testing to release those students who may otherwise need to be self-isolating, so that students can sit their exams safely.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for schools is available at [Guidance for full opening: schools](#).

Grading exams to ensure fairness

The qualifications regulator, Ofqual, worked with the Department for Education (DfE) and stakeholders from across the sector to determine the approach to grading for 2021. In recognition of the challenges this cohort faced and is facing, Ofqual has decided that grading will carry forward the overall generosity of 2020, to ensure the 2021 cohort are treated fairly, relative to their 2020 peers.

Given there were unintended differences across subjects in summer 2020, Ofqual will aim to spread the generosity of 2020 results between subjects more evenly, so that students are not disadvantaged because of their choice of subjects.

Supporting clinically extremely vulnerable students

The majority of students who are on the clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) list have been advised that they can attend school or college. Only a small number of students on

the CEV list may not be able to attend school and will continue to receive their education through remote learning. These students should be prioritised by their schools or colleges to receive remote learning and where they do not have a laptop or internet connection to access remote learning, the school or college will provide the technology and internet access to ensure that their education is not disrupted. We will continue to review the circumstances for these students.

Students who have been considered and approved by their school or college to take their exams at home will sit their exams under normal exam conditions specified by the awarding organisation if parents and students agree. This already happens in a very small number of cases each year.

Adapting exams to take account of the disruption

We recognise the disruption which many students are experiencing due to coronavirus (COVID-19). Ofqual is working with awarding organisations to provide details of the additional support to be provided in this exceptional year for A level and GCSE exams at the end of January 2021.

Students will be supported through providing advance notice of some of the topic areas that will be covered in exams. Additionally, in some subjects, supporting materials, such as formula sheets, will be provided on the day of the exams. This will allow students to focus on depth of understanding in these areas and target their revision in the run up to exams.

For vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), Ofqual has been working with awarding organisations throughout the year to agree a number of adaptations to these qualifications to take account of disruption, which are currently being implemented. For VTQs on performance tables, awarding organisations will also be able to reduce the number of optional units that are assessed. 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.

Awarding a qualification for students who miss an exam due to coronavirus (COVID-19)

DfE has worked with the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ), Ofqual and the exam boards to ensure that the timetable for the summer GCSE, AS and A level series minimises the likelihood of a candidate missing all of their exams in one subject as far as possible.

Should a student miss some, or all, of the papers in a subject but have completed sufficient non-examined assessment (as a result of sickness or the need to self-isolate) then they can still achieve a grade through the special consideration process. Normally schools can request medical evidence from parents to support an absence where a school has a genuine cause for concern about the veracity of an illness. Students who miss exams due to coronavirus (COVID-19) will be expected to provide evidence to support the process. Further information about what evidence may be required to support applications for special consideration will be available closer to the exams.

A school or college should notify the relevant exam board as soon as possible if they wish to access the special consideration process which provides a grade if a candidate has achieved a percentage of their assessment. Exam boards can explain what support they can offer, and how to apply for it. A school, college or other exam centre should not wait until the student has completed their assessments, or until after results are issued, before contacting the exam board as this may mean the student misses out on additional support.

Special consideration also applies for VTQs and other general qualification students. Awarding organisations will have their own processes for special consideration for these qualifications.

Further details on special consideration, including how schools and colleges can apply on behalf of their students, will follow.

Students who miss all exams in one subject

If a student misses all GCSE or A level assessments in a subject due to sickness related to coronavirus (COVID-19), or the need to self-isolate and is unable to access the special consideration process, they will be eligible to sit a single contingency paper. This will take place between 28 June to 16 July 2021 and timetabled to allow at least a 10-day gap after each subject's final paper in the main series. Work has started on writing this timetable.

We are working with Ofqual to agree with exam boards what papers will be made available for each specific qualification. In most cases, we expect one contingency paper will be provided per GCSE and A level subject as well as for AS maths and further maths. We are reviewing whether there will be contingency papers in subjects that include non-examined assessment.

Contingency papers will be in a similar format to other papers (and similarly modified where requested), and will be produced specifically for this exam series. Contingency papers may also be appropriate for some VTQs or other general qualifications where there is no non-exam assessment. Contingency papers are already permitted for VTQs and other general qualifications and we are working with Ofqual and awarding organisations to consider for which VTQs or other general qualifications they might be used.

In every year, a small number of students have multiple papers scheduled for the same time. When this happens, the candidate is supervised until they can take the second scheduled paper, usually later the same day. Schools and colleges are familiar with this process. Further details on contingency papers, including how schools and colleges can register, will follow.

Students who miss all exams, including the contingency paper

In the event that a student misses all of their GCSE or A level papers in a subject during both the summer series and the contingency series, with legitimate reason, and does not have the required non-examined assessed elements required to access the special considerations process, a validated teacher assessment may be used to award a grade.

Students taking a vocational or technical qualification or other general qualification will also be able to have their qualification awarded where they have not been able to take all the assessment needed.

Further information on this will follow in the New Year.

Understanding and managing the impact of differential learning

Our priority is that there is a consistent approach to what is taught and will be assessed across schools and colleges. We acknowledge that some students will have faced greater disruption than others as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19).

An expert advisory group made up of a wide representation from across the sector is being established to consider these issues.

Reporting to parents

A package of information will be made available to parents 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 coronavirus (COVID-19), in autumn 2021. More information about [accountability arrangements](#) in future years is available.

Routine, graded Ofsted inspections will not be reintroduced until the summer term. During the spring term, inspectors will conduct monitoring inspections in schools most in need of support – inadequate schools and some schools that require improvement. These monitoring inspections will not be graded and will focus on matters that are particularly relevant at this time, such as curriculum and teaching (including remote education), and attendance, particularly of vulnerable children.