

POSITION PAPER

Vocational and technical qualifications and assessments 2020/21

Factors and principles shaping their operation and
regulation

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Purpose of this paper

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in loss of education and training during the spring and summer terms of the academic year 2019/2020, and it is possible that some public health restrictions might be in place during the next academic year. We know that clarity on the shape, operation and regulation of Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) for 2020/21 is urgently needed so that awarding organisations, schools, colleges and training providers (“centres”) and those who use and rely on qualifications such as Higher and Further Education establishments, employers and professional bodies can plan effectively.

In this paper we set out the factors we are considering with the sector as we design the approach we will take, and outline our thinking to date.

Our objectives

- to identify mitigations to the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on teaching and learning in 2019/20, and any potential impact in 2020/21, in relation to the assessment of regulated qualifications in 2020/21
- to enable timely planning for teaching, learning and assessment for 2020/21
- to work with the sector as we develop this approach and bring them the necessary clarity and assurance

Next steps

The views, insights and experiences of those who work to deliver, award and design VTQs are fundamental to ensuring confidence in these qualifications is maintained.

We are continuing with our programme of extensive engagement with representative bodies of schools, colleges and training providers, sector representative and professional bodies, unions, awarding organisations and stakeholders, and across government. We encourage heads of centres and professionals from across the sector to share their views with their representative and member bodies, so that these feed into the next stage of the development of our approach.

Should implementation of this approach require revisions to our regulatory framework, including our conditions or guidance for awarding organisations, we may need to undertake a formal consultation.

Our aim is to provide as much clarity as we can about our expectations of awarding organisations before the summer break so that schools, colleges and training providers can plan effectively.

Shaping VTQs and their assessments in 2020/21

Government's expectation is that assessments take place next academic year. Within that expectation, we are considering whether the shape of regulated VTQs and their assessments in 2020/21 should, in some cases, be different to what we are used to. It might be necessary to make some changes to reflect teaching and learning that has already been lost, and we are also considering what measures may reasonably be taken to safeguard against any further disruption that may occur, during the coming academic year. In doing this we must not compromise our expectation that assessments secure qualifications that are a reliable indication of knowledge, skills and understanding, of practical competence, and that, as far as possible, standards will be maintained.

The approach to VTQs in 2020/21 should seek to secure consistency between the approaches awarding organisations take to similar VTQs. And just like the arrangements for spring and summer 2020 VTQs, it should aim not to disadvantage or advantage VTQ learners against their peers taking General Qualifications such as A levels and GCSEs (noting also that many students take mixed programmes).

What you have told us

Since mid-March we have undertaken an ongoing programme of engagement and insight gathering, through formal consultations, discussions with representative and professional bodies and unions, and directly with heads of centres and other FE professionals. They have told us about the challenges they face and the factors we need to bear in mind, all of which point to significant flux in centres in the first academic term of 2020/21.

Whatever their age or stage of education, learners have suffered a loss of face-to-face teaching time and disruption to their education this year. This will impact on programmes of study in 2020/21, as centres will have to take steps to aid learners to 'catch up' on time away from their centre.

Whilst restrictions are currently easing, centres are alive to the possibility of social distancing measures having an impact in 2020/21. Any future disruption, for example in response to localised outbreaks of coronavirus (COVID-19), might require flexible and responsive teaching and assessment at a local level.

There will be some learners who have not been able to either receive a calculated result or complete an adapted assessment this summer. In many cases this was unavoidable because the assessments needed to confirm occupational competency in areas where health and safety requirements were critical. These assessments are expected to be delivered as soon as is practical in the 2020/21 academic year. Preparing learners for these assessments will impact on teaching time, and centres may need to accommodate returning learners to deliver these assessments. There may also be some learners who did receive a calculated result, or a result following an adapted assessment, who may need or want to sit (or re-sit) an assessment next year. The provision of an autumn assessment series for GCSEs, AS and A levels will increase the burden on centres in September and may impact on teaching time.

Many GCSE learners will progress with little formal assessment experience other than mock exams. This will increase the burden on centres who will have to take steps to prepare learners to take formal assessments.

We may find learners choosing to enrol on different qualifications, in line with the sectors which are growing as the economy recovers. This might require centres to respond swiftly to ensure their provision can meet learners' needs. There is also the potential for an influx of learners whose next step has changed; they may have decided to forgo university, and chosen more local further education, training or an apprenticeship instead. This may result in changes to entry patterns for regulated qualifications.

There will be necessary changes to teaching and learning too. The Department for Education is considering measures, including on remote and online learning, as part of efforts to address issues of lost learning. Providers are currently planning to move some teaching and learning online. Where remote and online teaching and learning is established effectively, remote and online assessment is more likely to be successful.

The majority of VTQs have (often substantial) practical elements that cannot be accommodated through remote or online learning. This learning and assessment activity will have to take place where learners can develop their skills, and/or access relevant equipment, in line with any social distancing measures set out in guidance from the Department for Education.

Stakeholder views on potential approaches

Stakeholders have been clear that they support our view that we should move away from the calculation approach in 2020/21. This was introduced for summer 2020 at pace to mitigate the short-notice cancellation of exams and assessments at a point in the academic year when most learners had completed the majority of their course of study. There is an expectation that assessments will go ahead in 2020/21, and that assessment remains the most reliable way of measuring a learner's performance. However, there is recognition that depending on the public health situation, assessment may be impacted by localised social distancing measures. Impacts on assessments will, of course, vary between centres depending on the courses that they offer and their approaches to teaching and learning. Land based colleges, for example, have been particularly severely hit by events this summer, with the qualification mitigation approach generally being delay; they will need to accommodate this in 2020/21. Likewise, qualifications in certain sectors, for example those in the performing arts, are likely to need to adapt assessment methods and/or content to accommodate the impacts of any social distancing.

During our engagement, a number of themes and factors have emerged that will inform the approach to 2020/21:

- **the potential for reducing assessment burden across a range of qualifications.** Going beyond those changes that might be specifically needed depending on Department of Education guidance on social distancing, there may be some opportunities to reduce assessment burden. In some qualifications skills are subject to repeated assessment, and there may be the potential to reduce this, increasing available teaching time. Likewise, greater recognition of prior

learning may be possible. However, such measures will inevitably increase the stakes of those assessments that do take place, potentially disadvantaging some students who may do less well on one occasion and reducing the reliability of the assessment as learners get fewer opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills

- **minimising reductions in VTQ content.** There is little appetite from the sector for reductions in content (in particular in relation to higher-risk competency qualifications), given the potential impact on what the qualifications signify and what they are there to do. Changes to content in this context will need to be considered carefully because significant change risks devaluing qualifications at worst, and limiting comparability with previous and future cohorts of learners at best. There is also a recognition that amending content at a late stage might cause more burden for centres who would need to familiarise themselves with new specifications. There may, however, be appetite for other changes such as reducing the number of optional routes through a qualification
- **enabling flexible assessment delivery.** There is demand for adaptations to make assessments deliverable in a more flexible manner. This would assist centres delivering assessments within the constraints of social distancing, and also help deal with the impacts of any further localised disruption. Options suggested include providing more assessment opportunities, increasing the availability of on-demand assessments or wider assessment windows, or maximising early assessment opportunities, so that these are 'banked' and safeguard against potential further disruption. Likewise, there is the potential to learn from and build in any of the adaptation activity that has developed over recent months. There is appreciation however that adaptations that provide benefits on one hand, may bring their own challenges on the other
- **making implementation manageable.** Centres need time to prepare for delivery and to prepare learners for potentially different forms of assessment. This drives the calls for approaches that will make implementation more manageable: early clarity, and consistency across VTQ awarding organisations, as well as coordinated communications and arrangements

The approach we are developing

Informed by experiences over the recent months and the contextual factors described above, alongside our statutory objectives, the approach we are developing:

- is focussed on mitigating the impact of disrupted learning and teaching, including through adapting the delivery and availability of assessments – and in doing so moves away from using calculated results
- will be structured around a set of principles that can guide operational decisions about how qualifications should be treated
- will consider qualifications in broad groupings

Principles

It is our intention to structure our approach to 2020/21 delivery around principles. These are informed by our statutory objectives, the policy positions embedded in the arrangements for spring and summer 2020, and significant sector feedback.

The principles we propose to adopt are as follows.

- learners taking VTQs should not be advantaged or disadvantaged against their peers taking general qualifications; this is particularly important where learners are competing for the same progression opportunities
- assessments must secure that qualifications are a reliable indication of the knowledge, skills and understanding specified in the qualification and any required standards of practical competence must not be compromised
- we should maintain standards in line with our statutory objective as far as is possible
- qualification content should not, in general, be reduced and any content changes will need to be considered carefully; however, where awarding organisations can restructure the content so it can reasonably be streamlined, such as in relation to optional units, we should allow them some discretion to do that
- we should maximise assessment manageability, where this will allow for an increase in teaching time in order to minimise the impact on outcomes, noting that this needs to be carefully balanced with the need to ensure that qualifications remain sufficiently valid and reliable
- we should take steps to maximise flexibility in how and how often assessments are delivered so as to reduce the impact of disruption, illness or quarantine, including at a local level
- we should take steps to increase resilience and safeguard against future disruption in 2020/21, including exploring opportunities presented by the inherent flexibility of the modular delivery modes of many vocational and technical qualifications so that learners can bank assessments as soon as they are ready
- we should seek to secure, as far as is possible, that awarding organisations act consistently, particularly when delivering similar qualifications
- we should give clear guidance to awarding organisations regarding how they should approach special consideration where learners miss or do not complete assessments, which they were preparing to take, due to factors outside of their control
- we should limit the amount of information that centres have to process, by centralising communications or coordinating communications between awarding organisations as much as we can
- we should proactively support other parties, including government, in reducing disadvantage to learners where those risks cannot be addressed through the regulation of qualifications

Applicable qualifications

The intention is for these principles to apply to all VTQs, including T Levels and other General Qualifications other than GCSEs, AS or A levels, which are currently the subject of a separate consultation exercise. It does not extend to apprenticeship EPAs.

We think that qualifications will be considered as 3 groupings, different to the categories used in the arrangements for delivery of results this summer. These groups are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they allow a pragmatic approach to be taken to determining how qualifications should be approached to secure appropriate delivery and maintenance of standards. The groups are:

1. On demand/roll-on roll-off qualifications
2. Competency qualifications
3. Qualifications used for educational progression

These groupings have been identified as we have noted that awarding organisations will need to adopt different practices and methods, to operate in line with our principles, and the impact of these is likely to vary for these different groups of qualifications.

1. On demand/roll-on roll-off

These qualifications and assessments are already delivered flexibly. As they are available when learners are ready to take them, it should be possible for assessment opportunities to be rearranged so that learners are able to take them and the awarding process can run as normal. This flexibility should accommodate further localised disruption. Additional flexibilities may also be possible and these may include remote invigilation, or assessment adaptations to reduce assessment burden.

2. Competency qualifications

For these qualifications, assessments directly evidence the required standards of practical competence which must not be compromised. These qualifications indicate what a person can do, or that they are job-ready, as well as being reliable indicators of knowledge, skills and understanding. It would not be appropriate for awarding organisations to alter the standard to be attained or increase risking the reliability of the assessment; likewise, they should not reduce the content of the qualifications, for that may prevent a learner from demonstrating their competence, unless that content is optional or duplicative. It would be appropriate for awarding organisations to review their approach to the assessment and to look to reduce assessment burden, particularly in lower-risk sectors.

3. Qualifications used for educational progression

This group of qualifications are those which serve the same purpose as GCSEs and A Levels. So, it includes Applied Generals, Technical Awards that sit alongside GCSEs, and others which have similar purposes, and are funded by government. They are considered as a group to ensure there is a consistent approach to securing outcomes for these VTQs compared to GQ-

equivalents, which enables mitigation of the risk of disadvantage or advantage to VTQ learners against their peers undertaking GQs.

'Mixed-purpose' qualifications

We recognise that many VTQs serve more than one purpose, and could be considered to fall into different groupings. We think that a choice will need to be made to determine the grouping, whether a qualification is designed primarily for educational progression or aimed principally at employment, demonstrating competence. We need to determine an approach that recognises these different purposes, and can work for a range of delivery models including where they are on demand/roll-on roll off.

Working together to finalise arrangements for 2020/21

Ofqual is the regulator of awarding organisations and the qualifications they offer in England. Addressing many of the risks impacting on qualifications and assessments is outside our scope, so it is vital that we work with partners, with stakeholders, with other regulators and with government to deliver a coordinated system wide approach. This is happening now, as we finalise the arrangements for 2020/21, and will continue as we seek to secure standards, minimise burden and mitigate risk to disadvantage to learners throughout the delivery and award of these assessments and qualifications.

Our aim is to provide as much clarity as we can on the arrangements for 2020/21. We will set out our expectations of awarding organisations before the summer break so that these can inform the planning schools, colleges and training providers need to undertake.

We are keen to continue to gather views on these arrangements, to inform the final stages of development. We will continue our extensive engagement with and through representative and member bodies, and would urge heads of centres and professionals to share their concerns, views and proposals through these bodies.



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Published by:



Earlsdon Park
53-55 Butts Road
Coventry
CV1 3BH

0300 303 3344
public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofqual