

CONSULTATION DECISIONS

# Arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level exams in autumn 2021

Decisions following a consultation on arrangements for an autumn 2021 exam series in response to the cancellation of exams in summer 2021

**ofqual**

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# Introduction

Following the government's decision that GCSE, AS and A level exams cannot be held in summer 2021 in a way that is, and is perceived to be, fair, in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic the Secretary of State directed Ofqual on 23 February 2021 to make provision for a full series of GCSE, AS and A level exams to be held in the autumn.

We consulted on our proposed arrangements for this exam series from 17 March to 9 April 2021. We have published an [analysis of the 1053 responses we received](#). We set out in this document the decisions we have taken following the consultation.

## Summary of decisions

We have decided that:

1. Any student who receives a teacher-assessed grade (TAG) this summer, or who an exam board reasonably believes would have entered for the exams in summer 2021 had they taken place, can take the corresponding GCSE, AS and A level exams in autumn 2021. In addition, any student who was aged at least 16 on 31 August 2021 can take the GCSE English language and maths exams, as is usually the case.
2. We will require the exam boards to offer exams in all GCSE and A level subjects and to offer AS exams in biology, chemistry, further maths, maths and physics. Each exam board can decide whether to offer exams in the other AS subjects if it wishes to do so.
3. An exam board will not have to offer exams in any subject for which it has received no entries by the entry deadline.
4. The exams will be in their normal format, with no adaptations being made.<sup>1</sup>
5. Except for art and design qualifications, grades will be determined by students' performance in the exams only – there will be no non-exam assessments.
6. For art and design qualifications, grades will be determined by students' performance in a task set and marked by the exam board.
7. AS and A level exams will be held in October and GCSE exams in November and December. We will also allow, but not require, the exam boards to offer GCSE English language and GCSE maths exams in January 2022 for

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<sup>1</sup> Reasonable adjustments will be made for disabled students.

students who were eligible to enter the autumn exams in those subjects but did not do so.

8. The usual arrangements for appeals and reviews of marking<sup>2</sup> will apply to the exam series.
9. An exam board must issue a replacement certificate to a student showing the higher of an autumn 2021 or summer 2021 grade in response to a request from that student. We will not require the exam boards to provide replacement certificates for students showing the higher of the summer 2020 and the autumn 2021 grade.

## Details

### Eligibility to enter the autumn 2021 exams

There was clear support from those who responded to the consultation for any student who receives a teacher-assessed grade in summer 2021 to be eligible to enter the corresponding autumn 2021 exams (91% agreed or strongly agreed for GCSEs, 76% for AS and 92% for A levels). There was also clear support for allowing the exam boards to accept entries from students who, in the exam board's opinion, would have entered the exams in summer 2021 had they not been cancelled (84% agreed or strongly agreed).

Views were more mixed on whether other students should be allowed to take the exams, with parents and students (including private students such as those who are home educated) generally being in favour with more mixed views from school and college staff. Overall, 60% agreed or strongly agreed that GCSE exams should be open to any student. The corresponding figures for AS and A level were 54% and 59% respectively. Many of the comments in favour of allowing all students to enter the exams referred to private candidates, who might have decided not to seek a teacher-assessed grade in summer 2021 but to take exams in the autumn instead. Some respondents raised concerns that entries from such students might not be accepted by the exam boards because they could not provide evidence of their intention to take the summer exams.

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<sup>2</sup> By 'usual' we mean the arrangements that apply when examinations take place. Information about Ofqual regulations for reviews of marking and appeal arrangements are included in [qualification level conditions and guidance for GCSE](#) and [qualification level conditions and guidance for GCE](#). Further [information can be found on the JCQ website](#).

Other respondents, including teachers and those from schools and colleges, raised concerns that autumn exams would be an unhelpful distraction for students and that students would be ill-prepared to take exams at that time.

We have decided that entry to the autumn 2021 exam series should be restricted to students who receive a teacher-assessed grade in summer 2021 and to students who, in the opinion of the exam board, would have entered summer 2021 exams had they not been cancelled. We will expect the exam boards to give the benefit of any doubt to private candidates, to address concerns that they might not be able to provide evidence of their intention to take exams in the summer had they taken place.

We have decided not to open up entry more widely. Exams will be provided in the autumn solely in response to the cancellation of the summer exam series (except for GCSE English language and GCSE maths exams which are always available in the autumn).

Students who were not planning to take exams in the summer would not have expected to have the opportunity to take exams in the autumn and would not have been preparing to do so. Their progression will not be affected if they cannot take exams in the additional exam series in the autumn. As explained below, students will be assessed by exam-only in the autumn series (except for art and design). It would be preferable for students who were planning to take exams in summer 2022 to wait until then so they have the maximum opportunity to demonstrate their full range of knowledge and skills.

## Regulatory requirements on the exam boards to offer exams

Respondents to the consultation mainly agreed that we should require the exam boards to offer GCSE and A level exams in autumn 2021: 77% said we should require the exams boards to offer GCSE exams and 80% that we should require them to provide A level exams. Views were more mixed on AS, with the majority of the exam boards arguing that they should be prohibited from offering AS exams in the autumn. Views were more evenly split among parents, students and teachers about provision of AS exams. We asked for views on whether we should require or permit the exam boards to offer AS exams, or prohibit them from doing so. Overall 40% of all respondents said we should require the provision of AS exams, 45% that we should permit the exam boards to offer AS exams and 15% that we should prohibit them from doing so.

Arguments against requiring the exam boards to offer AS exams tended to focus on the low entry rates, the additional costs to exam boards of providing them and their lower value (relative to A levels) for progression purposes. Arguments in favour of

requiring the exam boards to provide AS exams tended to highlight the value of the AS for private candidates who, in particular, can find it more difficult to secure predictive grades to support their higher education applications, and fairness for students generally. Some responses singled out further maths AS as an important qualification for progression onto some higher education programmes.

We have decided to require the exam boards to provide GCSE and A level exams in all subjects. We have decided that the exam boards should be required to offer AS exams in the following subjects only: biology, chemistry, further maths, maths and physics. The exam boards will be able to offer AS exams in other subjects if they choose to do so.

In coming to our decision, we have taken into account the number of students who took AS exams in autumn 2020. The only [subjects in which the exams were taken](#), across the exam boards, by at least 100 candidates were:

- biology: 198
- chemistry: 258
- maths: 335
- further maths: 107
- physics: 158

The provisional entry figures were higher for these (and other subjects) but, as observed by some respondents to the consultation, a number of students who entered for the exams (at all levels) did not take them.<sup>3</sup> We believe that it would be disproportionately burdensome to require the exam boards to provide AS exams in subjects for which the take-up is likely to be extremely low. Entries to AS exams have been declining year-on-year since 2015 when the AS was decoupled from the A level. AS qualifications are not usually required for progression purposes, except for maths and further maths.

We have also decided that an exam board can withdraw the offer of any exam if it has received no entries for it by the entry deadline.

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<sup>3</sup> Provisional entries were: biology – 275, chemistry – 340, further maths – 115, maths – 410, physics – 200. There were also 130 provisional entries for psychology although [only 94 students took the exams](#).

## The nature of the exams

We proposed that the autumn exams should comprise the usual number of papers per subject. Overall, 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal. We proposed that the style of questions included in the exams should not be changed for the autumn series. Overall, 89% agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal. We also proposed that the exams should be their normal format: 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. 85% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the exam should be taken under the normal conditions.

Respondents raised concerns that, if changes were made to the way exam papers were presented or to the way the exams were conducted, students would not have the time or support needed to adjust to the different approach. They would therefore be disadvantaged by any changes.

We also proposed that students should not be given advance information about the topics that would be included in the exam papers. Student views were mixed with regard to this proposal. Private candidates were more supportive of our proposed approach than other students. Overall, 58% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that students should not be given advance notice about the content of the papers, 11% neither agreed or disagreed and 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

We also sought views on our proposal that students should only have access to the usual support materials in the exams. Again, student views were more mixed but, overall, 69% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal.

We have decided that the autumn exams should be in their normal format and that no adaptations should be made (other than reasonable adjustments for students with special educational needs or disabilities). This will make sure the exam arrangements are familiar to students, avoid the risk that such arrangements might advantage students who have access to support over others, and will avoid additional costs and workload for teachers, exams officers and the exam boards.

## Grades to be based on exam performance only (except for art and design)

A majority of all types of respondent agreed that grades from the autumn series should be based on students' performance in exams and, with the exception of art and design, there should be no non-exam assessment in the autumn series. Overall, 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this proposal. Private candidates were more supportive than other students; schools and colleges and their staff were particularly supportive.

While we recognise the importance of the usual non-exam assessments in many subjects, and especially those with a performance element such as dance and drama, we believe the difficulties of completing such assessments in the autumn would outweigh the benefits. We have therefore decided that grades should be based on students' exam performance only.

Many respondents (36%) did not have a view on arrangements for art and design qualifications. Of those who did, the majority (43%) agreed or strongly agreed with our proposal that students should only complete a task set by the exam board, and 57% agreed or strongly agreed that exam boards should mark their work. We have decided that students taking art and design qualifications should be assessed on their performance in a task set and marked by the exam board.

There was strong support for our proposal that students entering exams in autumn 2021, for subjects that have a separate endorsement for practical skills or spoken language skills, should be able to carry forward any endorsement they already have. Those subjects are:

- A level biology
- A level chemistry
- A level physics
- A level geology
- GCSE English language
- GCSE modern foreign languages

82% agreed or strongly agreed with our proposal in respect of the A level sciences and geology and 83% in respect of GCSE English language and modern foreign languages. We have decided to build this into our regulatory arrangements for the autumn 2021 series, making provision for any student who does not have such an endorsement, or who wishes to improve any endorsement they do have, to be able to be assessed in the autumn if their centre is willing to do so.

## The timing of the exams

Our proposals that AS and A level exams should take place in October and GCSE exams in November and December were strongly supported: 74% agreed or strongly agreed that AS and A level exams should be held in October and 74% agreed or strongly agreed that GCSE exams should be held in November and December. We also sought views on whether GCSE English language and maths exams should be held a little later than usual; there was less support for this change: 34% agreed or strongly agreed, 35% neither agreed or disagreed and 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

We do not usually prescribe exactly when exams must take place; we require that GCSE, AS and A level exams must be held in May and June only, with provision for GCSE English language and maths exams in November.

We have decided to require that AS and A level exams must be held in October and GCSE exams in November and/or December 2021. This will allow the exam boards to set the exact timetable and to decide on the timing of GCSE English language and maths exams.

In light of concerns about students' readiness to take GCSE English language and maths exams in the autumn, and concerns about schools' and colleges' ability to manage large exam entries if public health safeguards remain in place, we will also make provision for the exam boards to offer exams in these subjects in January 2022 if they wish. We made the same provision for the current academic year, although the exam boards decided, having sought feedback from schools and colleges, not to offer exams at that time.

## Reviews of marking and appeals

We proposed that the usual arrangements for reviews of marking and appeals should be in place for the autumn 2021 series. There was strong support for this proposal – 88% agreed or strongly agreed. We have decided to implement this proposal.

## Certificates

We proposed that a student whose autumn 2021 grade was higher than their teacher-assessed grade should be able to ask their exam board to issue a replacement certificate showing the higher of the grades. There was strong support for this proposal – 86% agreed or strongly agreed. We have decided to require the exam boards to issue such certificates when requested by a student to do so.

We also proposed that such provision should not be made for students who did not receive a teacher-assessed grade in 2021 but who received a grade in summer 2020. With the exception of the awarding organisations, the majority of responses from all types of respondent groups opposed this proposal. Overall, 25% agreed or strongly agreed with our proposal, 17% neither agreed or disagreed and 58% disagreed or strongly disagreed with our proposal.

Had the exams taken place this summer, students who had a grade from summer 2020 and who took exams in summer 2021 would not have been able to receive a replacement certificate to show the better of the summer 2020 and the summer 2021 grade. Similarly, students who received a grade in summer 2020 and who have re-entered the qualification for summer 2021 will not receive a replacement certificate if

they achieve a higher grade this summer. Exam certificates are designed to show the results from one exam series. We viewed the autumn 2020 exams as a part of the exceptional arrangements for issuing grades in summer 2020 and we will do the same for 2021. We have therefore decided not to require the exam boards to issue replacement certificates to students who have a grade from summer 2020 and who achieve a higher grade in the autumn 2021 exams.

## **AEA and Project qualifications**

We sought views on our proposal that we should not introduce any new regulatory requirements in respect of AEA and Project qualifications, because our rules do not prescribe when AEA exams can be offered nor when projects can be submitted. Most respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with our proposal (61% in respect of the AEA and 60% in respect of Project qualifications). The majority of respondents who had a view agreed or strongly agreed with our proposal (30% in respect of the AEA and 33% in respect of project qualifications). We have decided not to make any changes to the regulatory requirements for either of these qualifications.

## **Equality impact assessment**

The majority of respondents (73%) did not identify any impacts of our proposals that would negatively affect students because of their protected characteristics that we had not already recognised. Respondents who identified impacts raised a range of issues and possible mitigations. Some of these concerned factors beyond our control, such as support for students to help them catch up with their education and payment of entry fees. Some suggested that, to avoid further disadvantaging certain groups of students, there should be no exams in the autumn. Others argued that students would best be served if the full range of exams was available.

Similarly, there were mixed views about the impact on students if the exam arrangements were different to usual, for example if information was provided in advance about the topics that would be covered in the exam questions. Some thought this would advantage students who had access to a private tutor and disadvantage students who were already most disadvantaged. Others suggested such adaptations would make the exams fairer for all. Some suggested that information about the exam topics should be provided to some students, for example those whose education had been most affected by the pandemic, but not to others.

Many of the comments raised concerns about private candidates, highlighting that disabled students might be disproportionately represented among this group of students, and that students taking community languages often entered as private candidates and were disproportionately black and minority ethnic students.

Respondents were mainly concerned about such students having the opportunity to

take exams in the autumn, as they might find it difficult or impossible to obtain a teacher-assessed grade in the summer.

We had regard to the issues raised as we made our decisions.

## Regulatory impact assessment

The costs to schools and colleges and to exam boards of an autumn exam series were raised by many respondents. Others also raised concerns about the costs to students, for example, of purchasing revision materials, travelling to exam venues and of the entry fees. Non-monetary costs were also raised by some respondents who were concerned about the health and well-being of teachers and students.

Some respondents noted that many of the costs associated with an exam series, whether incurred by a school or college or by an exam board are fixed costs that do not vary even though the number of candidates entering the exams is very low, for example invigilation costs and the costs associated with writing and distributing exam papers. The possibility of reducing costs for schools and colleges by running the exams through regional hubs, rather than in individual centres, was raised as one potential mitigation.

Some respondents were concerned that the cost to exam boards of an autumn series would be taken into account by the boards when they decided whether they could reimburse schools and colleges for any proportion of the fees paid for summer 2021 entries and, if so, the size of any rebate – to the detriment of schools and colleges.

There is no question that it will be costly for exam boards, in particular, to run an autumn series for what will likely be a very small number of candidates. We have taken these costs into account when taking our decisions.



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