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Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2021 and 2022

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Summary

- 1 England: exam grades and appeals in summer 2021
- 2 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: awarding in 2021
- 3 Exams in Summer 2022
- 4 Awarding in 2020

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Contents

1	England: exam grades and appeals in summer 2021	6
1.1	Cancellation of exams in summer 2021	6
	Sector reaction	6
	Government consultations on arrangements for 2021	7
1.2	Results days in England in 2021	7
	A different appeals system in 2021	8
	Grounds for review and appeal, and the process	9
	Autumn GCSE, AS and A Level exam series	10
1.3	Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs)	10
	How VTQs are being awarded in 2021	10
	Requests for review and appeals for VTQs	11
2	Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: awarding in 2021	12
2.1	Scotland	12
2.2	Wales	12
2.3	Northern Ireland	13
3	Exams in Summer 2022	15
3.1	England	15
	What will 2022 grades be ‘pegged to’?	16
	Reaction to plans for 2022	16
3.2	Wales	18
3.3	Scotland	18
3.4	Northern Ireland	19
4	Awarding in 2020	20
4.1	England	20

Original model: Centre assessment and statistical adjustment	20
2020 grade statistics summary	23
What proportion of Centre Assessed Grades were adjusted?	23
Percentage of CAGs adjusted, by centre type	25
Final A Level outcomes compared to 2019	26
Final A Level outcomes by centre type	27
GCSE Attainment in 2020	28
Final GCSE outcomes by centre type	28
Ofqual analysis of student characteristics and 2020 grading: equalities	29
4.2 Awarding in Scotland in 2020	31
4.3 Awarding in Wales in 2020	32
4.4 Awarding in Northern Ireland in 2020	32

Summary

Summer exams in 2021 cancelled for the second year running

Students due to sit public exams in summer 2021 in all four UK nations missed face-to-face teaching for most of the summer 2020 term, and much of the spring term 2021. Some also had to self-isolate during the autumn term 2020.

In 2020, GCSEs, AS and A level exams, and those for some equivalent qualifications, also faced widespread cancellation. They were replaced with a controversial grading processes involving centre assessment followed by statistical standardisation. Ultimately, statistical standardisation was dropped in favour of teacher/ centre assessment, unless the adjusted grades were higher. Overall, final grades were significantly higher than in 2019.

Summer 2021 again sees the widespread cancellation of exams, and awarding in all four home nations based on teacher- or centre-assessment, instead. In 2021, no statistical adjustment processes are being used. Final results for many qualifications, including GCSEs, A Levels, and Scotland's National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers, will be released in August 2021. There will be review and appeal processes available where students believe they've received the wrong grades.

England: plans to resume exams in summer 2022

In England, the Government is planning for exams to resume in summer 2022, and is consulting on assessment arrangements. It is proposing some changes to general, and vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs). However, concerns remain about whether these measures will go far enough to address inequalities, and whether schools, colleges, and students will have enough notice of the final arrangements.

This briefing paper provides an overview on:

- Awarding processes for 2021
- Reviews and appeals where students disagree with their grades
- Information on exam proposals for 2022
- Background information on what happened in 2020, and how grades differed from previous years, between different groups of students, and different types of setting.

It focuses on England, but also includes some more limited information on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

1 England: exam grades and appeals in summer 2021

1.1 Cancellation of exams in summer 2021

Students who were due to sit public exams in summer 2021 – for example, GCSEs and A Levels - missed face-to-face teaching for most of the summer 2020 term, and also much of the spring term 2021. Some may also have been required to self-isolate during autumn term 2020.

In England, the original intention had been to go ahead with exams in summer 2021, in a modified form. However, on 4 January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that GCSE, AS and A Level exams in the summer would be cancelled, and replaced by a teacher-assessed grades (TAGs). The approach to awarding Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) will depend on the nature of the qualification.

Results and appeals in 2021: guidance

Exams regulator for England, Ofqual, has published guidance for students on results in summer 2021, which covers how grades are being awarded, and the appeal processes that are in place:

- Ofqual, [Student guide to awarding: Summer 2021](#), 22 July 2021

More information on the process for awarding results in summer 2020, and on outcomes by student and school and college characteristics can be found in [section four](#) of this briefing paper.

Sector reaction

Membership organisation, the Association of Colleges (AoC) said that the proposals were “the best solution to a difficult situation”, but cautioned that bringing forward GCSE results day would create “extremely high workloads” for college staff. It also cautioned about the potential for bias in the proposed approach.¹

¹ Association of Colleges, ‘[Plans for awarding grades in 2021 set out by government - AoC responds](#)’, 24 February 2021.

Think tank, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) said that the Government had been right to opt for teacher assessment, but that “significant risks” remained. These included the potential for inconsistencies between pupil groups and institutions, for “extremely high” grade inflation, or for large numbers of student appeals.²

Social mobility charity, the Sutton Trust, also said the Government was right to opt for teacher assessment, describing it as the “most pragmatic option, with enough flexibility to ensure students are only judged on what they have covered in a highly disrupted year.” However, it said that moderation would be “crucial” to ensuring comparability of results between more affluent and lower-income schools.³

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said that the plans appeared to “chart a path which avoids the awful chaos of last year”, but that it was concerned about the decision to issue GCSE results in the same week as A Level results.⁴

Government consultations on arrangements for 2021

Exams regulator for England, Ofqual, and the Department for Education, jointly carried out several consultations on awarding [GCSEs, AS and A Levels](#) and [vocational and technical qualifications](#) (VTQs) in 2021.⁵ The final approach is set out in two documents:

- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades will be determined in summer 2021](#), 25 February 2021. There is also [an infographic](#) setting out the process.
- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on alternative arrangements for the award of VTQ and other general qualifications in 2021](#), 25 February 2021. Again, there is [an accompanying infographic](#).

1.2

Results days in England in 2021

In England, GCSE, AS and A Level and equivalent results will be announced on the following dates:

- AS and A Level results: **Tuesday 10 August 2021.**

² Education Policy Institute, ‘[Education Policy Institute responds to the government’s plans for 2021 grades](#)’, 25 February 2021.

³ Sutton Trust, ‘[The Sutton Trust responds to the Government’s new assessment proposals](#)’, 25 February 2021.

⁴ National Association of Head Teachers, ‘[The government owes GCSE and A Level students a robust system of awarding grades, says NAHT](#)’, 25 February 2021.

⁵ [Letter from Gavin Williamson to Simon Lebus](#), 13 January 2021.

- GCSE results: **Thursday 12 August 2021.**

A different appeals system in 2021

For GCSEs, AS and A Levels and qualifications commonly taken as alternatives to these, there will be a review and appeals process which will differ substantially from the normal process.

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) represents exam boards across the UK. It has [published guidance](#) on the process in 2021.

The exams regulator for England, Ofqual, has also [published statutory guidance](#) on reviews and appeals in 2021.

In respect of GCSEs, AS and A Levels, and some other relevant qualifications, there will be two main stages:

- The first stage is **review by the exam centre (i.e., the school, college, or provider)**. The JCQ's advice is that students requesting a priority review should ask their school, college or provider for one by 16 August 2021. Priority reviews will be "for students applying to higher education who did not attain their firm choice, i.e. the offer they accepted as their first choice, and wish to appeal an A level or other Level 3 qualification result".⁶
- The second stage is an **appeal to the awarding body (exam board)**. The deadline for submitting priority appeals to awarding bodies is 23 August 2021. The deadline for submitting all other appeals to awarding bodies is 17 September 2021.

Individual schools and colleges may have their own deadlines and timescales that differ from those set out above.

A student who remains concerned after following the two stages above may be able to apply to the [Exam Procedures Review Service](#) (EPRS) for a procedural review.

Who can submit an appeal to an awarding body?

Appeals to awarding bodies can only be made by exam centres (i.e., schools and colleges) on the student's behalf. They can't be made directly by individual students or parents.

Review and appeal for private candidates

Electively home-educated and other private candidates may have entered for GCSEs, AS and A Levels and other equivalent qualifications through either

⁶ Joint Council for Qualifications, [A guide to appeals processes](#), Summer 2021 series, 10 June 2021, p20.

state-funded or independent schools, colleges or other providers. In these cases, the review and appeal process should be the same as for students on institutions' rolls.

Grounds for review and appeal, and the process

Centre review

Where students disagree with a grade or grades awarded for GCSE, AS or A Level (and some equivalents), they must first ask their centre to review whether it has made a procedural or administrative error. Ofqual guidance specifies that centres must have a review process enabling learners to request a review on the basis that the centre:

- i. did not follow its procedure properly and consistently in arriving at that result (including any failure of quality assurance), and/or
- ii. made an administrative error in relation to the result.⁷

Where a centre agrees an error has been made, it can submit a revised grade and accompanying rationale to the awarding body. If the awarding body agrees that the centre made an error, and thinks it's appropriate to make a correction, a revised grade will be issued to the student.

Ofqual guidance is that it expects an awarding body to do what it can to try and ensure that learners aren't disadvantaged in cases where centres wrongly decide not to conduct a review, or don't submit an appeal following a request to do so from the learner.⁸

JCQ guidance states that failure of a centre to process or accept a first-stage request for a review "could constitute malpractice and awarding organisations are required to follow up on such cases."⁹

Appeal to the awarding body

If a student remains dissatisfied following a centre review, then they can ask the centre to submit an appeal to the awarding body on their behalf. The centre must submit an appeal if requested to do so, and must also send supporting evidence.

Ofqual's regulatory framework for general qualifications in 2021 sets out that the grounds for appeal to the awarding body are that:

⁷ Ofqual, [General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework](#), 8 June 2021, p9.

⁸ Ofqual, [Statutory guidance: appeals under the GOAA regulatory framework](#), 8 June 2021.

⁹ Joint Council for Qualifications, [A guide to appeals processes: Summer 2021 series](#), 10 June 2021, p14.

(i) the Centre did not follow its procedure properly and consistently in arriving at the Learner's result (including any failure of quality assurance) or in conducting its review;

(ii) the result reflects an unreasonable exercise of academic judgement on the part of the Centre; and/or

(iii) the awarding organisation made an administrative error in relation to the result.¹⁰

Possible outcomes of review and appeal process

As is the case with exam appeals in non-pandemic times, the review and appeal process in summer 2021 may result in grades:

- increasing
- staying the same
- decreasing

Autumn GCSE, AS and A Level exam series

There will be an additional exam series in Autumn 2021, for students who received a teacher-assessed grade or who an exam board believes would have entered for the exams in summer 2021, if they had taken place. As normal, any student who was aged at least 16 on 31 August 2021 can take the GCSE English language and maths exams during this period, as well.

- Autumn series AS and A Level exams will take place in October 2021.
- Autumn series GCSE exams will take place in November 2021.
- Some exam boards may also run January 2022 exams in English language and maths.¹¹

1.3

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs)

How VTQs are being awarded in 2021

For those qualifications commonly taken as alternatives to GCSEs or A Levels, for example, BTECs and Cambridge Technicals - teachers and lecturers are using a variety of evidence to produce an assessed grade. This includes, for example, tasks or assessments already completed. Background information

¹⁰ Ofqual, [General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework](#), 8 June 2021, p9.

¹¹ See: Ofqual, [Consultation decisions: Arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level exams in autumn 2021](#), 13 May 2021.

on awarding VTQs in 2021 can be found in Ofqual's [Student guide to awarding summer 2021](#).

Results for VTQs used for progression to further or higher education should be issued on or before the equivalent summer 2021 dates for general qualifications such as GCSEs and A Levels – 12 August and 10 August, respectively.

Requests for review and appeals for VTQs

The VTQ landscape is complex, and there are many different qualifications awarded by different awarding bodies. Ofqual provides the following guidance for VTQ students who are unhappy with their grade:

Broadly speaking, the basis of appeals will be quite similar to that for GCSEs and A levels this year. During an appeal, the awarding organisation will check that centres have reasonably used academic judgement when deciding grades and that there have been no process errors or administrative errors. If you need more information check your awarding organisation's website.

For Level 3 qualifications, the deadline by which your training provider, school or college must submit an appeal on your behalf to the awarding organisation is 23 August if you want your appeal to be considered as a priority because you have not had your first choice of university place confirmed. You must check the deadline your own training provider, school or college has set for receiving your appeal.

Appeals relating to results for all other vocational, technical and other general qualifications should follow the usual process set out by your college, training provider or school, and awarding organisation.¹²

¹² Ofqual, [Student guide to awarding summer 2021](#), updated 22 July 2021, p13.

2 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: awarding in 2021

2.1 Scotland

On 7 October 2020, the Scottish Government announced that National 5 examinations (broadly, GCSE equivalents) would not go ahead in 2021,¹³ and on 8 December 2020, it confirmed that Higher and Advanced Higher exams would also not take place.

Instead, an Alternative Certification Model is being used to award all of these qualifications: that is, one based on internal assessment, supported by quality assurance.¹⁴ The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has [published guidance for schools, colleges and students](#) on changes to National Qualifications in 2021.

The day for final results for National 5, Higher, and Advanced Highers is Tuesday 10 August 2021, although provisional results were shared with students from June 2021 onwards.

Information on the appeals process can be found [on the SQA website](#).

2.2 Wales

Exam regulator, Qualifications Wales, [recommended](#) on 29 October 2020 that external assessment should be retained for GCSEs, AS and A Levels in Wales, in 2021, but that exams were only timetabled for A Levels. For GCSE and AS Levels, its view was that grades should be awarded on the basis of coursework and common assessments carried out during the year. For A Levels, its recommendation was that students should sit one exam paper for each subject, supplemented by coursework and set tasks.

An independent panel led by the Open University's Director in Wales, Louise Casella, came to different conclusions in their [interim report](#). The panel's early recommendations were that no exams should go ahead in 2021, and

¹³ Scottish Government, '[SQA Awards 2021: Deputy First Minister's speech](#)', 7 October 2020.

¹⁴ Scottish Government, '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - education sector: Deputy First Minister statement 8 December 2020](#)', 8 December 2020.

that grades should be awarded instead “on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken in schools and colleges”.¹⁵

On 10 November 2020, Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, [announced](#) that GCSEs, AS and A Levels would be cancelled in summer 2021.¹⁶ Instead, there would be teacher-managed assessments, including some that are externally set and marked but delivered within a classroom environment.¹⁷

GCSE, AS and A Level candidates in Wales began receiving provisional results in June 2021. Final AS and A Level results will be issued on 10 August 2021, and GCSE results, on 12 August 2021.

Broadly speaking, the review and appeals process for Qualifications Wales-regulated GCSEs, AS and A Levels is similar to that described above for England. Further information on appeals in Wales can be found in [a booklet published by Qualifications Wales](#).

2.3 Northern Ireland

On 6 January 2021, the Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced that exams would not go ahead in Northern Ireland in the summer. As for England, the original plan had been for exams to run, but with some adaptations.¹⁸ Explaining the decision, he said:

I have previously said that we are preparing for all eventualities and I had asked CCEA to take work forward so that plans are ready to be activated in relation to the 2021 examination series should they be required. I now feel we have reached a point where, while I still believe examinations are the most appropriate and fairest awarding methodology, with a further 6 weeks of remote learning having to be imposed, we cannot continued with exams in the way that was planned.¹⁹

On 2 February 2021, Mr Weir provided further details on the arrangements in a [Statement](#), and also confirmed that no algorithm would be used, unlike the original system implemented in 2020.²⁰

¹⁵ Independent review of the summer 2020 arrangements to award grades, and considerations for summer 2021: [Interim report](#), October 2020.

¹⁶ Welsh Government press release, ‘[Wales’ approach for qualifications in 2021 confirmed by Education Minister Kirsty Williams](#)’, 10 November 2020.

¹⁷ Welsh Government, ‘[Examination and assessment guidance: 2020 to 2021](#)’, updated 22 December 2020.

¹⁸ See: Department of Education news story, ‘[Changes to examinations and qualifications announced to support pupil progress](#)’, 9 October 2020.

¹⁹ Peter Weir, [Statement to the Ad-hoc Committee on Coronavirus](#), 6 January 2021.

²⁰ Peter Weir, [Statement on Alternative Awarding Arrangements summer 2021](#), 2 February 2021.

Students in Northern Ireland will get their AS and A Level results on 10 August 2021, and GCSE results on 12 August 2021, and as in Wales and England, there is a review and appeal process. The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) exam body has published [guidance for students and parents on the process](#) in relation to CCEA qualifications.

3 Exams in Summer 2022

3.1 England

Exams planned to go ahead, with some adaptations

The Government intends for GCSEs, AS, A Level and equivalent assessments and exams to go ahead in England in summer 2022. Additionally, current plans would see school-level performance (league) tables reintroduced for the end of the GCSE phase – key stage 4 - in 2022; school-level information is not being published during either 2020 or 2021.²¹

In July 2021, the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual jointly issued consultations on changes to awarding in 2022, in recognition of the disruption to education faced by pupils due to sit exams in that year:

- DfE/ Ofqual, [Proposed changes to GCSEs, AS and A Levels in 2022](#).
- DfE/Ofqual, [Arrangements for the assessment and awarding of vocational, technical and other general qualifications: 2021 to 2022](#).

Both consultations opened on 12 July and are due to close on 1 August 2021. The consultations make clear that the DfE And Ofqual are working together to develop contingency plans “for scenarios where exams cannot be held for any reason, either locally or nationally, or where individual students are unable to sit exams due to illness or self-isolation.”²² Two linked surveys, both closing on 7 August 2021, allow teachers, lecturers and students to share their views on how well the 2021 teacher assessment process worked:

- Ofqual [teaching staff survey on Teacher Assessed Grades](#), summer 2021
- Ofqual [student survey on Teacher Assessed Grades, summer 2021](#)

For GCSEs, AS, and A Levels, the proposals include allowing:

- Some choice of topic or content in GCSE English literature, ancient history, history, and geography.
- Demonstrations of practical work in:

²¹ Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): school and college accountability 2021/22](#), 19 July 2021.

²² Department for Education/ Ofqual, [Proposed changes to GCSEs, AS and A Levels in 2022](#), 12 July 2021, p21.

- sciences and some related subjects at GCSE.
- biology, chemistry, physics and geology at AS Level.
- environmental science at both AS and A Level.

This would be an alternative to students doing practical work themselves if necessary. Demonstrations could be remote or in the form of videos.

- Modifications to the practical endorsement component of A Level chemistry, physics, biology, and geology.
- Art and design GCSE, AS and A Level to be assessed solely based on students' portfolios of work, rather than an exam board-set task completed under timed, supervised conditions.
- The provision of advance information on the focus of the content of exams, in in most subjects.
- Formula sheets in GCSE maths, GCSE combined science, and GCSE physics exams.

Some subjects such as physical education and geography include non-examination assessment – for example, practicals or performance of skills, or fieldwork elements. Adaptions to the usual requirements have already been confirmed, and are set out in another Ofqual document:

- Ofqual, [Consultation outcome: Arrangements for non-exam assessment for qualifications in 2022](#), 16 June 2021.

What will 2022 grades be 'pegged to'?

The July 2021 Ofqual/ DfE consultations don't deal in any detail with how qualifications will be graded in 2022. Overall, grades awarded by centre/ teacher assessment in 2020 were considerably higher than in 2019, and may again bear a similar relationship with 2019 grades, in 2021. The consultation documents say that further information on this issue will follow in autumn 2021, when grades from summer 2021 awarding are known.

Reaction to plans for 2022

On Thursday 22 July 2021, Minister Nick Gibb gave an oral Statement to Parliament, in part covering the proposed changes to exams in 2022. He said:

In putting together these proposals, we have been guided by the overarching principle of fairness. The proposed measures on which we are consulting are intended to help students progress to the next

stage of their lives, and to succeed when they are there. We look forward to receiving views on the proposals and plan to announce final decisions on adaptations, as well as further details about contingency plans, in the autumn term.

I know that students who will take these exams next summer have faced a huge amount of disruption to their education this year. In addition to these measures, we are already investing huge sums to help them catch up so that they are ready to sit these exams. [...]²³

Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Kate Green MP, criticised the fact that the consultation on 2022 had not been launched earlier, and asked why greater topic choice would only be available in some GCSE subjects. She said that she welcomed that the Government acknowledged the need for contingency measures.²⁴

Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon MP, asked about lost learning and the impact on disadvantaged students, in particular, “many of whom”, he said, had “not yet benefited from the catch-up programme”. He continued:

My worry about the approach the Minister set out is that requiring exam boards to provide advance information about exam content and support means that the Government are in essence reducing a 100 metre race to a 50 metre race while keeping all the pupils at the same starting point whatever their disadvantage. The pupils who have experienced the most lost learning will still be the most disadvantaged compared with those who were in school more at the time. Could he at least consider ensuring a level playing field and taking a more nuanced data-driven approach that takes into account the fact that millions of children have experienced lost learning? That could be done by increasing the time allowed to do the exams or adjusting the grade weighting to reflect the number of days that pupils have lost.²⁵

The National Education Union (NEU) said the Government had acted with “grim predictability” by launching a short consultation “in the dead of summer”. Joint General Secretary, Kevin Courtney, argued that schools, colleges and pupils needed certainty by 1 September 2021, at the latest, but the consultation was “unlikely to provide definitive answers ahead of the new term starting in September. At best it will be a partial picture of arrangements.”²⁶

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said the consultation was necessary but came too late. On the specific proposals, it said that “giving

²³ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1173](#)

²⁴ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1175-1176](#)

²⁵ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1178](#)

²⁶ National Education Union press notice, [‘Qualifications in 2022’](#), 12 July 2021.

students what is effectively a broad revision list just a few weeks before exams begin will not ensure fairness for all students [...]”.²⁷

3.2 Wales

The current plan is for exams to go ahead in Wales in summer 2022, with adaptations. Exam regulator for Wales, Qualifications Wales, said in a statement:

[Welsh exam board] WJEC has recently consulted on the proposed adaptations with teachers, learners and parents. This week WJEC will publish the outcome of the consultation and the information will be available for schools and colleges.

Unless there is significant impact by the pandemic, we are planning that approved GCSE, AS and A level qualifications will be assessed via exams and non-examination assessments as normal, but reflecting the adaptations, in summer 2022. However, alternative arrangements will be put in place in case there is significant impact on teaching and learning as a consequence of the pandemic.²⁸

WJEC subsequently [published information](#) for schools and colleges about the planned adaptations to qualifications, on its secure website.²⁹

3.3 Scotland

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley-Anne Somerville, told the Scottish Parliament on 22 June 2021 that she wanted “to be in a position to confirm our central planning assumption for awarding qualifications in 2022 for the start of the school term in August, in order to give as much certainty as possible for learners, teachers and the system. That will take account of the state of the pandemic.”³⁰

In the interim, the Scottish Qualifications Authority has [published some further information](#) on adaptations to National Qualifications in 2021-22.³¹ It confirmed that the existing modifications to these qualifications (which include National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers) will stay in place for the

²⁷ National Association of Head Teachers press notice, ‘[Government is already ‘way behind the curve’ with arrangements for exams in 2022, says NAHT](#)’, 12 July 2021.

²⁸ Qualifications Wales, ‘[Statement about assessment arrangements for Summer 2022](#)’, undated.

²⁹ WJEC website article, ‘[Summer 2022: Adaptations to GCSE and AS/A level qualifications](#)’, undated. This links to WJEC’s secure website, which requires an account to access.

³⁰ [Shirley-Anne Somerville Statement to Scottish Parliament](#), 22 June 2021,

³¹ Scottish Qualifications Authority news story, ‘[National Qualifications and Higher National and Vocational Qualifications in session 2021-22](#)’, 23 June 2021.

coming year. The modifications would apply regardless of any future decisions taken by the Scottish Government on the 2022 exam diet [series].

3.4 Northern Ireland

GCSEs, AS and A Level exams are planned for summer 2022, subject to the public health situation. Some changes will be made to the form and content of qualifications offered by Northern Ireland exam board, CCEA. A CCEA [news story](#) provided further details:

Today, Monday 17 May 2021, the [then] Education Minister, Peter Weir MLA, made [a statement](#) to the Northern Assembly, regarding awarding and assessment arrangements for Summer 2022.

Due to the disruption faced by COVID-19, the Education Minister announced that “significantly fewer examinations” would be sat in 2022 and there would be “significant reductions in assessment” across CCEA’s suite of GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications.

Further key points highlighted by the Education Minister included:

- One assessment will be omitted from the vast majority of GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications in 2022.
- Students’ overall grade will be determined by their performance in the unit or units they sit.
- A student who wishes to take all examinations can do so. There is no obligation to do so. Any student who sits all units will be awarded the higher grade from either all units or the mandatory units only.
- Unit omissions will also be applied across CCEA Entry Level, Occupational Studies and Vocationally Related qualifications.

Regarding the contribution of 2021 AS grades to 2022 A2 grades, the Education Minister confirmed that CCEA A Level awards in 2022 will be made based on students’ performance in their A2 examinations only.³²

The Department of Education has published [a FAQs document](#) relating to CCEA qualifications in 2021-22.

³² CCEA news story, ‘[Education Minister Makes Announcement on Summer 2022 Assessment](#)’ 17 May 2021.

4 Awarding in 2020

4.1 England

Original model: Centre assessment and statistical adjustment

There were no GCSE or A Level examinations in Summer 2020. Instead, a different process, including statistical standardisation, was initially used to provide most candidates in England with A Level grades.

A level results in England were originally announced on 13 August 2020. Significant concern was raised about the impact of the system used to assign grades (see below), focusing in particular on students from less advantaged schools or colleges who had been awarded lower grades than expected, preventing them from taking up places at their preferred university.

On 17 August, Ofqual issued a [statement](#) withdrawing the previous system, and stating that grades would be awarded on the basis of information teachers had submitted about individual pupils – known as Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs). This would apply to AS and A levels, and also to the GCSE results to be published on 20 August:

There was no easy solution to the problem of awarding exam results when no exams have taken place. Ofqual was asked by the Secretary of State to develop a system for awarding calculated grades, which maintained standards and ensured that grades were awarded broadly in line with previous years. Our goal has always been to protect the trust that the public rightly has in educational qualifications.

But we recognise that while the approach we adopted attempted to achieve these goals we also appreciate that it has also caused real anguish and damaged public confidence. Expecting schools to submit appeals where grades were incorrect placed a burden on teachers when they need to be preparing for the new term and has created uncertainty and anxiety for students. For all of that, we are extremely sorry.

We have therefore decided that students be awarded their centre assessment for this summer - that is, the grade their school or college estimated was the grade they would most likely have achieved in their exam - or the moderated grade, whichever is higher.

The statement further said Ofqual was working with the Department for Education and universities on the way forward.³³

Ofqual issued a separate statement on the [grading of vocational and technical qualifications](#) (VTQs), such as BTECs. A different system had been in place for grading these qualifications:

Under the framework for VTQs, each awarding organisation has been responsible for developing its own model for issuing results in line with a set of principles. The framework allows awarding organisations, where necessary, to prioritise the issue of sufficiently valid and reliable results over the maintenance of standards. Ofqual developed and implemented this framework in close collaboration with awarding organisations and the wider sector. Although calculated results have been issued for many VTQs, in only a very few cases has the same kind of statistical standardisation process of Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) been used – in other words, we think there are few qualifications where the cohort has received entirely algorithmically determined grades.

Where a standardisation model similar to the Ofqual model for GCSEs and A levels had been used, Ofqual asked the relevant organisations to review their approach. As a result, Ofqual believed “a small proportion” of VTQ results would be reissued.³⁴

On 19 August, following Ofqual’s announcements, the awarding body Pearson announced that it was [regrading the following BTECs](#): BTEC Level 3 Nationals (2010 QCF and 2016 RQF), BTEC Level 1/2 Tech Awards, BTEC Level 2 Technicals and BTEC Level 1/2 Firsts.

Pearson said this was “to deliver fair outcomes for BTEC students in relation to A Levels and GCSEs and to ensure that no student is disadvantaged,” and that no grades would go down as part of the review.³⁵

The original awarding process: further detail

Schools and colleges were asked to provide a centre assessment grade (CAG). This is the grade a student would have been most likely to have achieved if they’d sat their exams and completed any non-exam assessment. They were also asked to supply awarding bodies with a list of candidates in rank order, within each grade, for each subject.

Standardisation

Following a [consultation](#), exams regulator for England, Ofqual, also decided that exam boards should standardise grades. This involved the use of:

³³ Ofqual, [Statement from Roger Taylor, Chair, Ofqual](#), 17 August 2020

³⁴ Ofqual, [Grading of vocational and technical qualifications](#), 17 August 2020

³⁵ Pearson, [Results day support for learners and parents](#), 19 August 2020

a statistical model which will include the expected national outcomes for this year's students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and previous results of the school or college.³⁶

The consultation set out the aims of standardisation as:

- i. to provide students with the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020;
- ii. to apply a common standardisation approach, within and across subjects, for as many students as possible;
- iii. to use a method that is transparent and easy to explain, wherever possible, to encourage engagement and build confidence;
- iv. to protect, so far as is possible, all students from being systematically advantaged or disadvantaged, notwithstanding their socio-economic background or whether they have a protected characteristic;
- v. to be deliverable by exam boards in a consistent and timely way that they can quality assure and can be overseen effectively by Ofqual.³⁷

In response to the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that the standardisation process would:

place more weight on a centre's historical performance in a subject than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will result in students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020.³⁸

Further information on the standardisation process was provided in Ofqual's [interim report on awarding in summer 2020](#).³⁹

³⁶ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020.

³⁷ Ofqual consultation, '[Exceptional arrangements for assessment and grading in 2020](#)', 24 April 2020, p7.

³⁸ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020

³⁹ Ofqual, '[Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020](#)', 13 August 2020.

2020 grade statistics summary

Nearly all Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) which were changed were adjusted downwards (95% for A Levels and 92% of AS Levels). More A Level CAGs were marked down in FE colleges (46%) and least in independent schools (34%).

The final results showed an increase in top grades at A level and GCSE, particularly in independent and grammar schools. The smallest increases in top grades were in FE colleges:

- In 2020, 87.5% of A Level entries achieved grade C or above compared to 75.5% in 2019.
- In 2020, 75.9% of GCSE entries achieved grade 4 or above⁴⁰ compared to 67.1% in 2019.

What proportion of Centre Assessed Grades were adjusted?

As noted above, on 13 August the (standardised) A level and AS level results for England were announced.

The chart below shows that in total **39.1%** of A level Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) were adjusted downwards, around **2.2%** were adjusted upward, and **58.7%** of entries were not adjusted.

The pattern for AS Level CAGs was similar, **36.9%** of AS level CAGs were adjusted downwards, around **3.1%** were adjusted upward, and **59.8%** of entries were not adjusted.⁴¹

There were 718,276 A level exam **entries** in total, this means that around 280,800 CAGs were adjusted downwards, 15,800 were adjusted upwards and 421,600 were not adjusted.

There were 70,505 AS level exam **entries** in total, this means that around 26,000 CAGs were adjusted downwards, 2,200 were adjusted upwards and 42,200 were not adjusted.⁴²

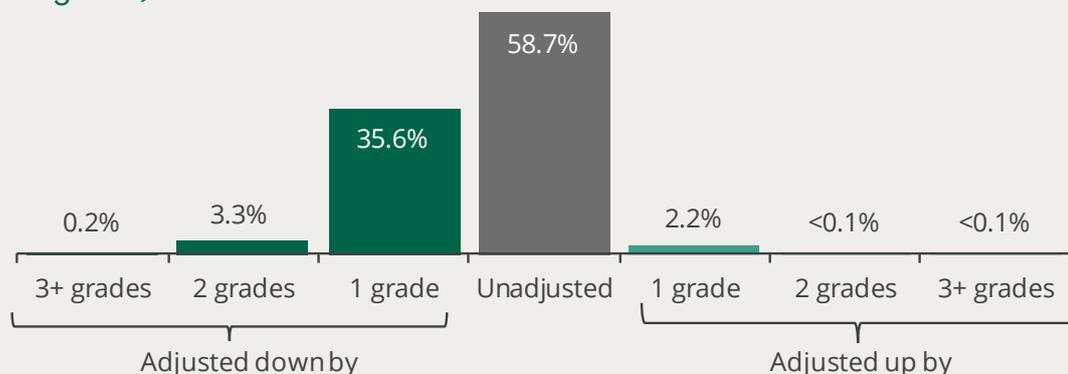
⁴⁰ Grade 4 is a standard pass and approximately equivalent to an 'old' high D/ low C.

⁴¹ As above, Table 9.8.

⁴² Ofqual, [Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020](#) (Table 9.8)

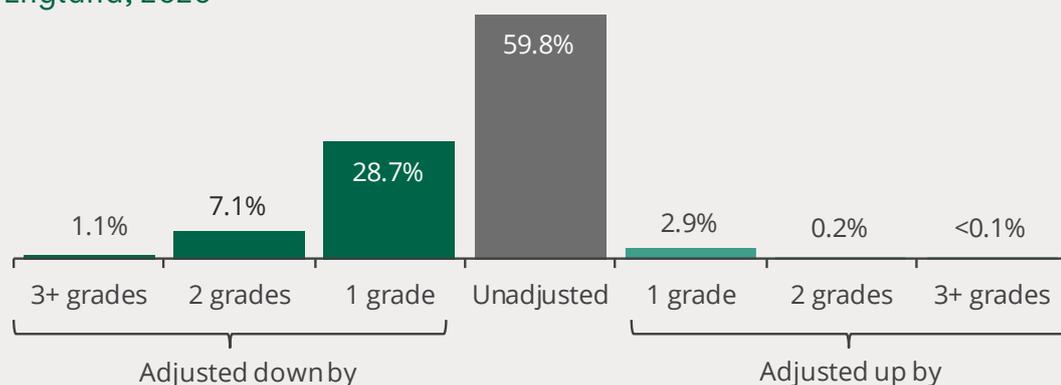
Around 39% of A Level CAGs were revised downwards and 2% were revised upwards

England, 2020



Around 37% of AS Level CAGs were revised downwards and 3% were revised upwards

England, 2020



Source: [Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020, Ofqual](#). (Table 9.8)

A later [Ofqual report](#), published on 18 December 2020, also looked at CAG adjustments on a student, rather than entry, basis. Of all students who had at least one (but not all) of their A level CAGs adjusted, **the vast majority (92.1%) had downward adjustments only**, a minority of students (4.1%) had upward adjustments only, and (3.7%) had a mix of adjustments.

Ofqual suggests this distribution is not surprising, given that CAGs, overall, were more generous than grading in a normal year, and that [one of the aims](#) of the standardisation process was to maintain standards year-on-year, i.e., protect against uncontrolled grade inflation.⁴³

⁴³ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level Update to the interim report](#), December 2020, p9.

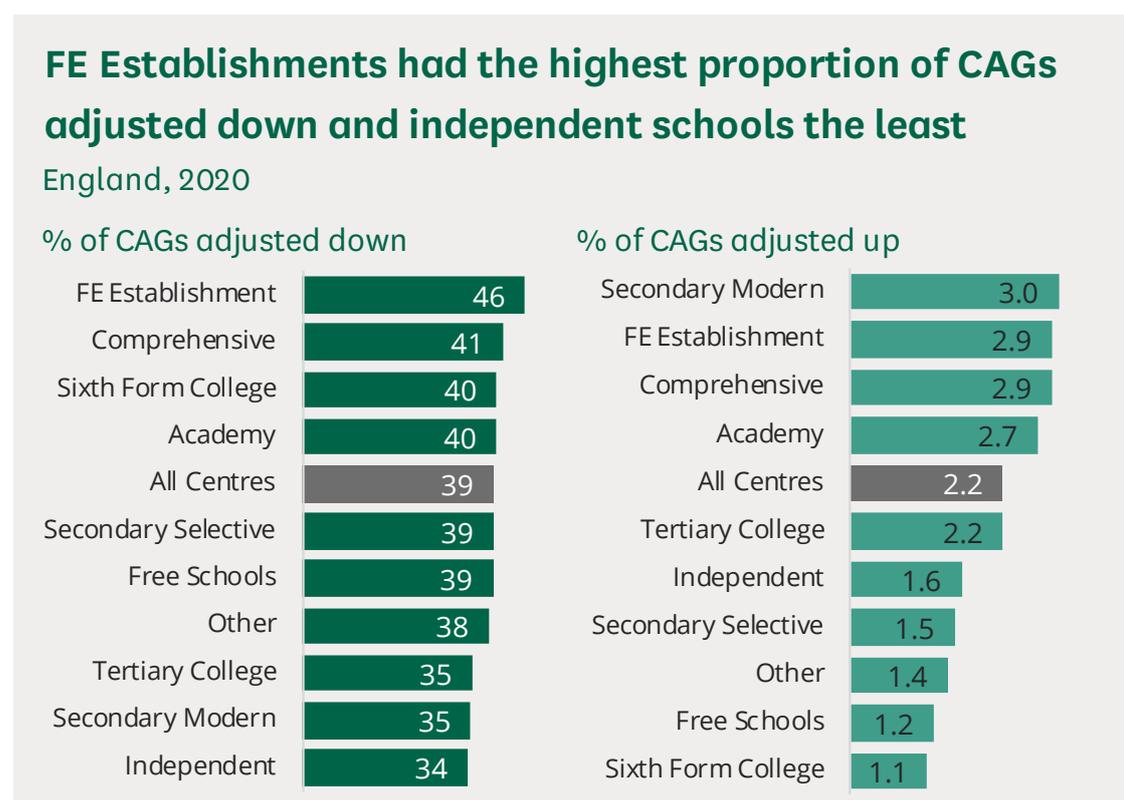
Percentage of CAGs adjusted, by centre type

The [Ofqual report](#) from December 2020 also looked at CAG adjustments broken down by centre type. Ofqual cautions when interpreting these figures:⁴⁴

[I]t is important to bear in mind that they are influenced by the extent to which the CAGs submitted by different schools and colleges were generous, as well as the proportion of small cohorts within particular centres (students in small cohorts received their CAG, since the statistical evidence was not sufficiently reliable to allow standardisation [...])

The centre type with the highest proportion of CAGs adjusted downwards were FE establishments (45.6%) and the centre type with the lowest proportion were independent schools (33.8%).

The centre type with the highest proportion of CAGs adjusted upwards were secondary moderns (3.0%), and the centre type with the lowest proportion were sixth form colleges (1.1%).



Notes: Other centres include private candidates. Caution should be taken when making comparisons between centre types.

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p10.

⁴⁴ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level Update to the interim report](#), December 2020, p9.

Final A Level outcomes compared to 2019

Exam outcomes in 2020 were issued under a very different set of circumstances than other years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This means that caution should be taken when making comparisons over time.

Ofqual's December 2020 [report](#) stated that "overall outcomes were slightly higher than 2019 across the grade range... outcomes had increased by a greater extent at some grades-and in some subjects-than others".⁴⁵

The table below shows the proportion of final A levels (the higher of the CAG or calculated grade) at each grade in 2020 compared to 2019.

On average, the proportion of entries achieving the top grades exceeded that of 2019. **In 2020, 87.5% of entries achieved grade C or above compared to 75.5% in 2019.**

The grade with the greatest increase in proportion of entries achieving it at A level was at grade A* (+6.6 percentage points compared to 2019), closely followed by grade A (+6.3 percentage points). The grade with the greatest decrease in the proportion of entries achieving it was grade D (-6.0 percentage points).

Proportion of A Level entries achieving each grade			
England, 2020 results compared to 2019			
	2020	2019	Annual change (percentage points)
A*	14.3%	7.7%	+6.6
A	23.8%	17.5%	+6.3
B	27.3%	25.9%	+1.4
C	22.1%	24.4%	-2.3
D	9.3%	15.3%	-6.0
E	2.9%	6.7%	-3.8
U	0.3%	2.5%	-2.2
A*-C	87.5%	75.5%	+12.0

Notes: Includes all subjects. Caution should be taken when comparing 2020 results with 2019 due to the very different circumstances under which they were issued.

Source: JCQ, [GCE A Level & GCSE AS Level Results - Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

⁴⁵ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p4.

Final A Level outcomes by centre type

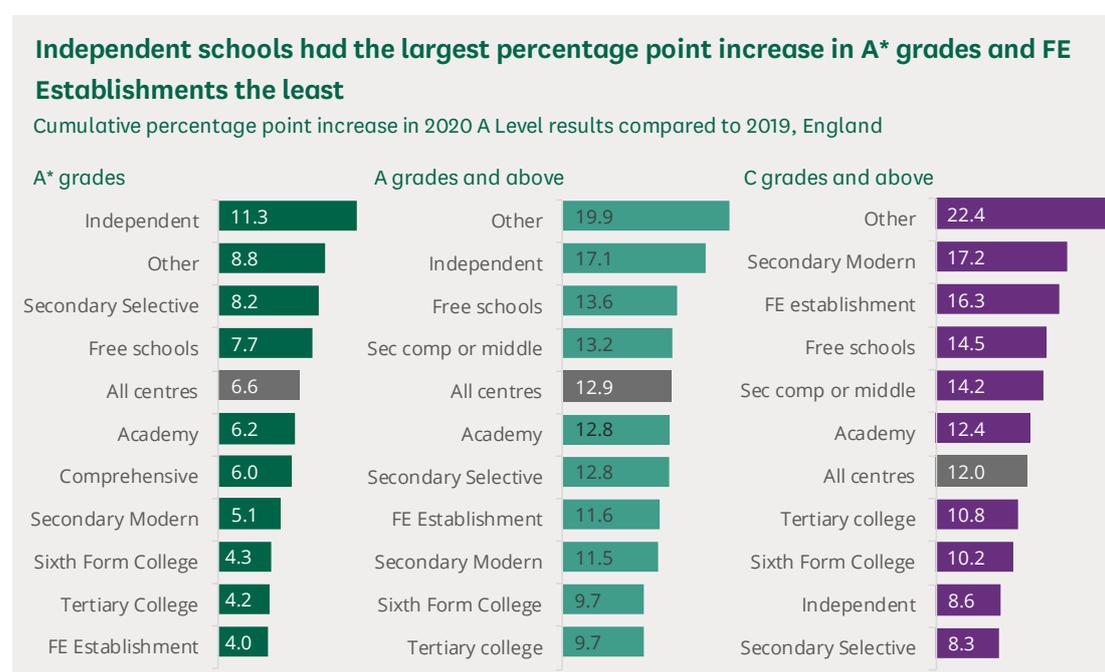
Ofqual's December 2020 [report](#) compared the proportion of final A levels (the higher of the CAG or calculated grade) awarded at grades A*, A or higher and C or higher, by centre type, in 2020 compared to 2019. This change is expressed as a cumulative percentage point increase.⁴⁶

Ofqual's [report](#) stated that "It is clear that the differences in final grades compared to 2019 vary depending on the type of centre and by grade".⁴⁷

The table below shows that most centres recorded smaller increases in the highest grades compared to the increase at grade C and above. For example, FE Establishments recorded a 16.3 percentage point increase in C grades and above in 2020 compared to 2019, while they recorded only a 4.0 percentage point increase in A* grades.

The reverse trend is observed in a minority of the centre types. For example, independent schools recorded an 8.6 percentage point increase in C grades and above, while they recorded a larger increase in A* grades (+11.3 percentage points).

Ofqual explains that this is "to some extent" due to differences in the cohorts attending different centres. At independent centres there tend to be "more candidates around the top of the grade range – and any change in outcomes is therefore likely to be greatest at the top of the grade range".⁴⁸



⁴⁶ Cumulative percentage point change is the percentage point difference in the proportion of pupils that achieved a given grade *or higher*.

⁴⁷ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p6.

⁴⁸ Same as above.

Notes: Table ranked in order of greatest change in A* awards.⁴⁹

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, ps6-7; JCQ, [GCE A Level & GCSE AS Level Results - Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

GCSE Attainment in 2020

In November 2020 the Department for Education [published](#) national, local authority, and constituency level GCSE attainment data. This data is as announced on 20 August 2020 (any revised grades are not reflected). Unlike in previous years school level data was not published, and Progress 8 scores were also not published for any geography.

GCSE attainment in 2020 should not be compared to previous years due to the very different conditions that grades were awarded.

In 2020 the average Attainment 8 score for pupils attending state-funded schools was 50.2. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 38.6.

In 2020 the average proportion of state-funded pupils achieving grades 9-4 in English and Maths GCSE (broadly comparable to A*-C under the previous letter grade system) was 71.2%. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 49.2%.

In 2020 the average proportion of state-funded pupils achieving grades 9-5 in English and Maths GCSE (broadly comparable to A*-B/high C under the previous letter grade system) was 49.9%. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 27.8%.⁵⁰

Final GCSE outcomes by centre type

Ofqual's December 2020 [report](#) compared the proportion of final GCSEs awarded at grades 7 and higher, and 4 or higher, by centre type, in 2020 compared to 2019. This change is expressed as a cumulative percentage point increase.⁵¹

As with making comparisons with A Level outcomes (outlined in the previous section), Ofqual cautions about the effect that differences in the cohorts attending different centres can have on these results.⁵²

The table below shows that the percentage point change in grade 7 and above⁵³ GCSE awards in 2020 compared to 2019 was highest in independent

⁴⁹ 'Other' centres include: colleges of higher education, university departments, tutorial colleges, language schools, special schools, pupil referral units (PRU), HM Young Offender Institutions, HM Prisons and training centres

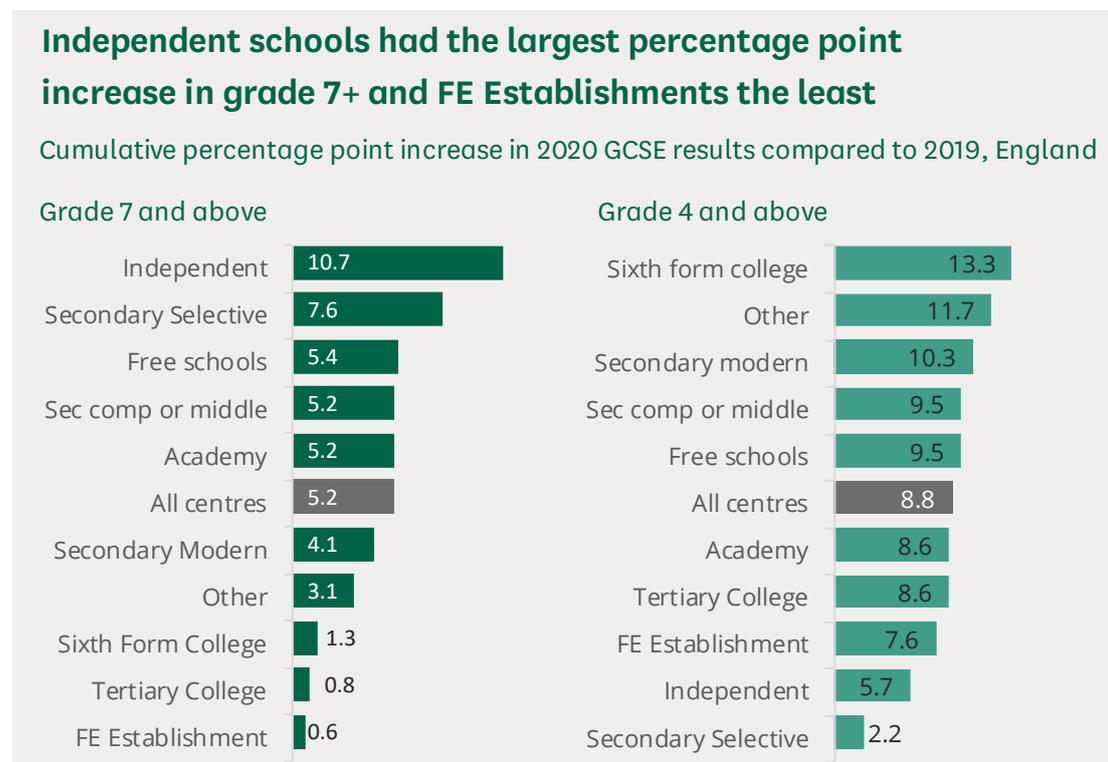
⁵⁰ Department for Education, [Academic Year 2019/20. Key stage 4 performance](#), updated February 2021.

⁵¹ Cumulative percentage point change is the percentage point difference in the proportion of pupils that achieved a given grade *or higher*.

⁵² As above.

⁵³ Grade 7 is approximately equivalent to an old 'A' grade.

schools (+10.7 percentage points). It was lowest in Further Education (FE) establishments (+0.6 percentage points). The average increase at this grade level across all centres was +5.2 percentage points.



Notes: Table ranked in order of greatest change in Grade 7 and above.⁵⁴

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p19; JCQ, [GCSE \(full course\) Results Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

Ofqual analysis of student characteristics and 2020 grading: equalities

On 26 November 2020, exams regulator for England, Ofqual, published analyses of grades awarded to candidates studying for both [academic](#) and [vocational or technical](#) qualifications in summer 2020.⁵⁵ The reports consider whether there was bias in outcomes that was attributable to students' known protected characteristics or socio-economic status. On academic qualifications, Ofqual suggested that final results were not suggestive of systemic disadvantage for any group of candidates sharing particular protected characteristics, or socio-economic status:

For GCSE and A level, [our research](#) compares 2020 A level and GCSE outcomes - centre-assessment grades (CAGs), calculated grades

⁵⁴ 'Other' centres include: colleges of higher education, university departments, tutorial colleges, language schools, special schools, pupil referral units (PRU), HM Young Offender Institutions, HM Prisons and training centres

⁵⁵ Ofqual, [Student-level equalities analyses for GCSE and A level](#), 26 November 2020; Ofqual, [An analysis VTQ grades awarded in spring and summer 2020](#), 26 November 2020.

and final grades - with results from 2018 and 2019. We broke down results by students' gender, ethnicity, first language, SEND status, free school meals eligibility and socioeconomic status.

Our evaluation found that had calculated grades been awarded (rather than the final grades awarded), the results would have been more closely in line with the established relationships between student characteristics and outcomes that we see in previous exam results. The changes seen by using final grades are small, however, and do not suggest that any groups of candidates who share particular protected characteristics or socioeconomic status were systemically disadvantaged.

At both GCSE and A level, the most consistent and significant effect was an uplift in outcomes for all groups using CAGs and final grades, but not using calculated grades.

At A level, the attainment gap that had previously seen male candidates outperform female candidates (when other variables are accounted for) narrowed further, having previously narrowed between 2018 and 2019. This suggests the change in the gender attainment gap is a continuation of a trend. This was true for CAGs, calculated grades and final grades.⁵⁶

Similarly, the report on VTQs pointed to little change in attainment gaps between different groups, compared to previous cohorts:

[The] research shows that grades awarded to those who sat those VTQs earlier this year were not substantially different to grades from previous years, despite the impact of COVID-19. There was, however, for certain types of qualifications, an increase in the number of top grades being awarded.

For the VTQ report, Ofqual researchers collected data from 33 awarding organisations on all learners who were awarded a grade for a Functional Skills, Other General, or Performance Table Qualification between mid-March and the end of July.

Attainment gaps between different demographic groups did not change or increase in most cases. These analyses do not suggest that any groups of candidates who share particular protected characteristics or socioeconomic status were systemically disadvantaged by the impact of the pandemic and the approach to awarding in 2020.

⁵⁶ Ofqual news story, '[Summer 2020 outcomes did not systemically disadvantage students](#)', 26 November 2020.

The overall profile of results for this group of qualifications was broadly in line with normal expectations. Ofqual will continue to monitor VTQ results in the months to come.⁵⁷

4.2

Awarding in Scotland in 2020

Scotland's original approach to awarding qualifications in 2020 was similar, but not identical, to that proposed for England, in that it used a combination of teacher assessment and moderation. Information on Scotland's original awarding methodology can be found on the [Scottish Qualification Authority's \(SQA\) website](#).

Scottish exam results for National 5s, Highers, and Advanced Highers were announced on 4 August 2020. Press reports noted that large numbers of students had received lower grades than they might have expected.⁵⁸

In a statement six days later, on Monday 10 August 2020, First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon said that in reference to exam awarding, the Scottish Government "did not get this right, and I am sorry for that". She added that "too many students felt they had lost out", as a result of "a statistical model or an algorithm", and that the burden had not fallen equally across society.⁵⁹

Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, made a further statement in the Scottish Parliament the following day, Tuesday 11 August 2020. In this, he apologised to students who received lower grades than they were expecting, but noted that three-quarters of grades were not adjusted during the statistical process at all. He said that the Scottish Government would:

- Require that all awards that were downgraded following statistical standardisation were withdrawn, and reissued based solely on teacher or lecturer judgement.
- Ensure affected students got fresh certificates.
- Permit learners whose grade was increased following statistical moderation, to keep those grades.
- Ensure that there were sufficient places in universities for the 2020-21 academic year.
- Commission an independent review of the awarding process, led by Professor Mark Priestly, of the University of Stirling.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Ofqual news story, '[Summer 2020 outcomes did not systemically disadvantage students](#)', 26 November 2020.

⁵⁸ See e.g., '[Scotland's results day: Thousands of pupils have exam grades lowered](#)', BBC News, 4 August 2020.

⁵⁹ Nicola Sturgeon speech, '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) update: First Minister's speech 10 August 2020](#)', 10 August 2020.

⁶⁰ Statement to the Scottish Parliament, '[Examination Results](#)', 11 August 2020.

The Scottish Government published [its response](#) to Prof. Priestly's rapid review on 7 October 2020.⁶¹

4.3 Awarding in Wales in 2020

In Wales, similarly, the original intention had been to award grades for GCSEs, AS and A Levels using a combination of centre assessment, and statistical standardisation. An overview of the approach originally planned can be found in this [briefing](#) published on 3 April 2020, by Qualifications Wales.⁶²

However, on 17 August 2020, Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, announced that grades for GCSEs, AS, A Levels and some other qualifications would instead be awarded based on centre assessed grades, unless they had been revised upwards as a result of statistical standardisation. In that case, the student would be allowed to keep the higher grade.⁶³

The Welsh Government subsequently asked Louise Casella, Director of the Open University in Wales, to lead an independent review of the summer 2020 awarding process. The review's interim report was published in October 2020.⁶⁴

4.4 Awarding in Northern Ireland in 2020

As for the other UK nations, Northern Ireland planned to use a combination of centre assessment and statistical adjustment in order to award GCSEs, AS and A Level grades in summer 2020.

An overview of the original approach to awarding qualifications regulated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) can be found in a CCEA news article published on 16 April 2020.⁶⁵ More detailed background can be found in a May 2020 CCEA guidance document for [exam centre heads](#).⁶⁶

⁶¹ Scottish Government, '[National Qualifications experience 2020 - rapid review: our response](#)', 7 October 2020.

⁶² Qualifications Wales, '[Centre Assessment Grades. Frequently Asked Questions](#)', 3 April 2020.

⁶³ See: Welsh Government press release, '[Statement from the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams](#)', 17 August 2020.

⁶⁴ Independent review of the summer 2020 arrangements to award grades, and considerations for summer 2021: '[Interim report](#)', October 2020.

⁶⁵ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, '[CCEA announces how GCSEs, AS and A levels will be Awarded in Summer 2020](#)', 16 April 2020.

⁶⁶ Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, '[Awarding for GCSE, AS and A Level Qualifications Summer 2020](#)', Version 2, 20 May 2020.

On 16 August 2020, Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced that GCSE students would be awarded solely based on centre assessment.⁶⁷ The following day, he announced that AS and A Level students would be allowed to keep whichever was the highest grade – i.e., either the centre assessed grade, or the post-statistical standardisation grade they had already been issued with by that point.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ See: Department of Education news story, '[Centre Assessed Grades to be awarded at GCSE in Northern Ireland](#)', 16 August 2020.

⁶⁸ See Department of Education news story, '[Changes to AS and A level awards in Northern Ireland](#)', 17 August 2020.

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