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Guidance

Coronavirus (COVID-19): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020

Updated 1 May 2020

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1. Did exams need to be cancelled?

From Friday 20 March, all educational settings are closed to everyone except the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak is expected to continue having a significant impact on the education system, and the country, for months to come. Therefore, exams have been cancelled to give pupils, parents, and teachers certainty, and enable schools and colleges to focus on supporting vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

2. What will happen to those who have already done some non-exam assessment?

Students who were due to sit A level, AS level or GCSE exams this summer will receive a calculated grade. The calculated grade process will take into account a range of evidence including, for example, non-exam assessment and mock results. To make sure that grades are fair between schools and colleges, exam boards will put all centre assessment grades through a process of standardisation using a model developed with Ofqual, the independent qualifications regulator. There's separate guidance from Ofqual on awarding GCSE, AS and A levels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcses-as-and-a-level-awarding-summer-2020>) which includes the implications for non-exam assessment.

3. How will you ensure that certain groups of students (for example those from disadvantaged backgrounds) do not lose out because of bias in teachers' assessments?

Ofqual is developing a fair and robust process that takes into account a broad range of evidence, including assessments by schools and colleges of the grades that students would have been likely to obtain if exams went ahead and their prior attainment. Ofqual's overriding aim is to make sure arrangements this summer are as fair as possible for all students.

Ofqual ran a consultation (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-exam-grading-and-assessment-in-2020>) from 15 to 29 April seeking views on aspects of their proposed assessment arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels, including an equality impact assessment informed by a review of the research literature on bias in teacher assessments. Ofqual will take feedback to their consultation, and the findings from their literature review and equalities impact assessment, into account when finalising the arrangements for these qualifications this summer. Responses are currently being reviewed and decisions from this consultation will be published shortly.

Pupils who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their ability will have the opportunity to sit an exam as soon as is reasonably possible after schools and colleges open again.

4. Will A level students get the predicted grades that were used for university applications?

No. We know that simply using predicted grades would not be fair to all students. The 'centre assessment grade', which the exam boards will ask schools and colleges to submit for A and AS levels and GCSEs, will take into account an assessment of the likely grade that students would have obtained had exams gone ahead and these will be standardised across schools and colleges. For this reason, students' final calculated grades will not necessarily be the same as either the predicted grades used for university applications, or the centre assessment grade put forward by their school or college.

5. Will schools be using mock exam results as a barometer for results – and is this fair on students as they did not know at the time these would be used as their final mark?

Mock exam results will be one of the sources of evidence that will be taken into account in this process, alongside others. There is separate guidance from Ofqual on awarding GCSE, AS and A levels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcses-as-and-a-level-awarding-summer-2020>) which explains to schools and colleges how to do this fairly and robustly, drawing on evidence to reach a holistic judgement.

6. Will the past performance of the school be taken into account when devising the calculated grade?

Ofqual's guidance says that one of the sources of evidence schools and colleges should draw on is the performance of this year's students compared to those in previous years. However, this is only one of the sources of evidence that will be taken into account. Ofqual's consultation, which ran from 15 to 29 April, included proposals for how the standardisation process at national level should take the past performance of schools and colleges into account. Responses are currently being reviewed and decisions from this consultation will be published shortly.

7. Is this an entirely new system?

This is a new system, but one which builds on existing practices, as education professionals are used to making holistic judgements about their students. These judgements will be standardised at national level to give grades that are as fair as possible.

8. When will I get my results?

A and AS level results will be published on 13 August and GCSE results on 20 August, as originally planned. This will enable progression to higher and further education to take place in the normal way. It will also allow students time to decide whether they wish to sit exams in the autumn, and to prepare for those exams if necessary.

Results days for other qualifications are set by individual exam boards. The aim is for results for vocational and technical qualifications used for progression to higher education to be available at the same time as A level results. If you are taking such qualifications, you should check the planned results day with your school or college.

9. Will universities, colleges and sixth forms accept these grades?

The calculated grades awarded this summer will be formal grades, with the same status as grades awarded in any other year. They will therefore be accepted by all institutions.

University representatives have already confirmed that they expect universities to do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to higher education.

10. What if I am unhappy with my calculated grade?

Ofqual and the exam boards are working to ensure that candidates are awarded a fair grade that recognises the work they have put in. If an A level, AS level or GCSE student does not believe the correct process has been followed in their case, they will have access to a right of appeal on that basis.

Ofqual has consulted on the arrangements for these appeals

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-exam-grading-and-assessment-in-2020>)

and will announce next steps shortly. In addition, if a student does not feel their grade reflects their performance, they will have the opportunity to take an exam in the autumn. Students will also have the option to take their exams in summer 2021, in line with usual practice.

11. What about private candidates or home educated students?

Where schools and colleges have accepted entries from external candidates (students who they have not taught themselves, because they have been home-educated, following distance-learning programmes or studying independently), those students should be taken account of in the process of producing centre assessment grades, where the head teacher or principal is confident that they and their staff have seen sufficient evidence of the student's achievement to make an objective judgement.

Ofqual and the exam boards have been exploring the options for those students who do not have an existing relationship with an exams centre and who need results this summer for progression purposes. The Joint Council for Qualifications has published some guidance for exam centres on accepting private candidates (<http://www.jcq.org.uk/media-centre/news-releases/jcq-publishes-supplementary-information-on-validation-of-evidence>) which sets out the options that will be available. Unfortunately, not all external candidates will be able to be awarded a calculated grade this summer because some will not be in a position to provide sufficient evidence to enable their exam centre to include them in their centre assessment grades and rankings. Students in this position will need to sit exams to get their grades, either in the autumn or in summer 2021.

Ofqual has asked organisations that represent higher and further education providers to consider the steps that providers could take when making admissions decisions this summer for any private candidates who do not receive a grade. They have said that they believe that institutions will consider a range of other evidence and information for these students to allow them to progress wherever possible.

12. Can private centres run GCSEs or A levels if they choose to do so?

No. Exam boards will not be issuing papers for this summer's GCSE, AS and A levels so there will not be the opportunity to sit them at any centre.

13. Does this mean every exam in every module in every subject being cancelled, or will a limited number go ahead at GCSE and/or A level?

Exam boards will not be issuing papers for this summer's GCSE, AS and A levels so there will not be the opportunity to sit them in any subject.

14. What about vocational and technical qualifications?

We recognise that many students will be taking vocational or technical qualifications (VTQs) and our priority is to ensure that students and adult learners taking these qualifications can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives, including starting university, college or sixth form courses, apprenticeships in the autumn, getting a job or progressing in work.

We know one approach to assessment of vocational and technical qualifications will not fit all, given the diversity of the VTQ landscape.

Ofqual published a consultation (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-assessment-and-grading-in-2020>) on its proposed measures for the assessment and awarding of VTQs on 24 April, closing 8 May. This is clear that qualifications used for progression to further or higher education, such as some BTECs, should wherever possible be issued with a calculated result, in line with the approach proposed for GCSEs, AS and A levels. For other vocational qualifications, such as those that are used for entry into employment where demonstration of practical competence is necessary, it won't be appropriate to calculate a result. For these, Ofqual will work with the awarding organisation to determine whether the assessment can be adapted. Only as a last result should assessment be delayed.

VTQ students will have access to a right of appeal if they believe any part of the assessment process was not followed correctly. Students who do not feel their result reflects their ability will be able to sit an assessment at the next available opportunity. Most vocational and technical qualifications have a number of assessment windows during the year and some awarding organisations may be able to make additional windows available.

15. Will students be required to do further work to contribute towards their grade?

Ofqual's guidance on awarding GCSE, AS and A levels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcses-as-and-a-level-awarding-summer-2020>) makes clear that there is no requirement for schools and colleges to set additional mock exams or homework tasks for the purposes of determining a centre assessment grade, and no student should be disadvantaged if they are unable to complete any work set after schools and colleges were closed. Where additional work has been completed after schools and colleges were closed on 20 March, Ofqual is advising head teachers and principals to exercise caution where that evidence suggests a change in performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work is done.

16. Can schools and colleges take incomplete coursework into account?

Ofqual's guidance on awarding GCSE, AS and A levels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/gcses-as-and-a-level-awarding-summer-2020>) makes clear that schools and colleges do not need to ask students to complete any unfinished non-exam assessment work for the purposes of grading. Where they do choose to take into account coursework completed after 20 March, Ofqual is advising head teachers and principals to exercise caution where that evidence suggests a change in performance. In many cases this is likely to reflect the circumstances and context in which the work is done.

17. What will young people with university offers do?

The grades awarded this summer will be formal grades, with the same status as grades awarded in any other year. There is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted.

University representatives have already confirmed that they expect universities to do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to higher education.

18. Do universities need to start making unconditional offers / should I accept an unconditional offer now that exams are cancelled?

Universities should not begin making new unconditional offers and applicants should feel no pressure to accept such offers, as they will be awarded a formal calculated grade for each exam they would have taken.

19. If I already have an unconditional offer, does that remain?

Yes. An unconditional offer means you have already met the entry requirements, so the place is yours if you want it.

20. If I take the exam option, will I still be able to go to university this year?

Students who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance will have the opportunity to sit an exam as soon as is reasonably possible after the beginning of the new academic year.

Our aim is for results to be awarded before Christmas, and Ofqual is working with exam boards to work out how this could be delivered. Universities representatives have assured us that universities will be as flexible as possible in their admissions.

Any student wanting to understand the implications on university admission of taking these autumn exams should speak to the university from which they have an offer after receiving their calculated grade in the summer.

21. Are iGCSEs and the International Baccalaureate also cancelled?

Yes. Summer exams for both international GCSEs and the International Baccalaureate have been cancelled in all countries this year. The awarding organisations that provide international GCSEs have published information about the arrangements they are putting in place for this year¹ which reflect those

being made for qualifications covered by Ofqual's consultation

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-exam-grading-and-assessment-in-2020>).

22. How will colleges, sixth forms and universities cope with the fact that these students will have missed out on some of their education?

These are extraordinary circumstances. We are working with schools, sixth forms, colleges and universities to ensure that we do everything we can to best help students prepare for and progress to the next stage of their education.

23. Might the exams be reinstated if schools and colleges return before the summer holidays?

No. The decision has been taken to cancel all exams this summer.

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1. Pearson: International Centres (not including UK) (<https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/campaigns/rest-of-world-covid-19-coronavirus-update.html>)

Cambridge International: guidance for schools on awarding grades

(<https://www.cambridgeinternational.org/news/news-details/view/update-from-cambridge-international-and-guidance-for-schools-on-awarding-grades-07-april/>)

OxfordAQA: May/June 2020 exam series (<https://www.oxfordaqaexams.org.uk/support/news>) ↩