

Cookies on GOV.UK

We use some essential cookies to make this website work.

We'd like to set additional cookies to understand how you use GOV.UK, remember your settings and improve government services.

We also use cookies set by other sites to help us deliver content from their services.

[Accept additional cookies](#)

[Reject additional cookies](#)

[View cookies](#)

GOV.UK

▼ Menu

[Home](#) > [Education, training and skills](#) > [School curriculum](#) > [Exam regulation and administration](#)
> [Ensuring the resilience of the qualifications system in 2023: GCSE, AS, A level, Project and AEA](#)

[Department](#)
[for Education](#)

[Ofqual](#)

Consultation outcome

Decisions: Ensuring the resilience of the qualifications system in 2023

Updated 30 November 2022

[Contents](#)

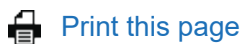
Introduction

[Introduction](#)

[Summary of decisions](#)

The Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual welcomed the return of

Details



exams and other formal assessments in summer 2022, for the first time since 2019. Exams and formal assessments are the best and fairest way of assessing what students know and can do. That's why it was so important that students were able to take them in 2022 and continue to take them in 2023 and the future.

The cancellation of exams – and the need for alternative assessment arrangements – is now very unlikely. The government does not expect to ever be in the situation again where exams do not go ahead, but good public policy means it is sensible to have in place contingency plans, even for extremely unlikely scenarios.

In the unlikely scenario that exams are cancelled in summer 2023, students' grades would be determined by their teachers, using a Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG) approach similar to that used in summer 2021. TAGs would be based on teachers' assessment of their students' work. In such an event, the Secretary of State for Education would set out, in a direction to Ofqual, the government's policy on how TAGs should be used to determine grades.

The DfE and Ofqual jointly consulted from 29 September to 20 October on guidance to schools and colleges about gathering assessment evidence to support resilience in the exams system in the unlikely event it is necessary to use that evidence to inform TAGs.

The proposed arrangements covered GCSEs, AS and A levels, Project qualifications, and the Advanced Extension Award (AEA) in mathematics. The focus of the proposals was on guidance to schools, colleges, and other exam centres on how they should gather and retain evidence from students so that it could be used both to support students' revision and exam preparedness and as a basis to determine students' grades in the unlikely event that formal exams could not go ahead as planned. The proposed guidance sought to minimise the burden on schools, colleges and students, and to support centres to provide the best possible preparation for students for their exams.

Where we refer to schools and colleges, this relates to schools, colleges and other exam centres.

Vocational and technical qualifications

The proposed arrangements did not cover vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs). This is because the approach throughout the pandemic for VTQs has been to place decision-making in the hands of the awarding organisations through the Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF). This was to recognise that no single approach is appropriate for such a diverse range of qualifications. VTQs are generally modular and have a high proportion of internal assessment. This means that it is more likely that there will be evidence available which could be used to determine grades.

There are a small number of VTQs which are assessed in a similar way to GCSEs and A levels. Ofqual expects awarding organisations offering those qualifications to take account of the outcomes of this consultation. Ofqual will continue to work with those awarding organisations, as it did in academic year 2021 to 2022, to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place. Ofqual expects awarding organisations to make schools and colleges taking these qualifications aware of any action needed as a result of the outcomes of this consultation. If schools and colleges have any questions about this they should contact the relevant awarding organisation.

The VCRF remains in place as a contingency measure to permit, only in the context of a worsening pandemic and a change in government policy, both the reintroduction of adaptations and the determination of results through alternative evidence or TAGs. A short consultation would be required in this scenario to permit the use of TAGs.

Summary of decisions

As outlined in our consultation document, both the DfE and Ofqual have responsibilities in this area, and so we consulted jointly.

The DfE is responsible for its policy for qualifications (including whether the government considers that exams can go ahead safely and fairly as planned) and the subject content that is taught and assessed. Ofqual is

responsible for assessment arrangements and is therefore responsible for setting rules to implement alternative arrangements, if required.

As outlined in the consultation, the DfE considers that, if it becomes necessary to cancel exams this should apply to all students and a TAG approach should be implemented nationally. This would only happen due to an event like the pandemic which has such severe and catastrophic consequences for a significant number of students. The DfE has also confirmed that TAGs would not be used to award a grade when exams take place.

In line with our respective responsibilities, Ofqual and the DfE have decided to implement the proposals set out in the consultation about the provision of guidance for teachers on how they should collect evidence of student performance. The DfE has decided that the provision of guidance for schools and colleges is appropriate, given its responsibilities in this area. Ofqual has decided that the proposed guidance would support schools and colleges in gathering evidence of student performance that could be used to determine a TAG should exams not be able to go ahead as planned. Ofqual has revised the guidance consulted on, in response to feedback, with a view to minimise further the burden on students, schools and colleges. Ofqual has taken a decision to publish the final guidance, in line with its responsibilities for qualifications and assessments, including in the unlikely case that exams cannot go ahead.

The government is firmly committed to exams taking place. Schools and colleges are, therefore, not asked to determine TAGs and should not seek to do so. Guidance on how to determine a TAG, and on any quality assurance and appeal processes, will be provided only in the unlikely event that exams are not able to go ahead safely or fairly. These arrangements would depend on the nature and timing of any decision that exams cannot take place.

In this decisions document and the accompanying analysis, we have not sought to discuss every point made by those who responded to our consultation. In taking our respective decisions and finalising the guidance we have, however, considered all the points made in response to the consultation.

Details

The evidence used to assess students' performance

The proposed guidance was developed with a view to (i) minimising additional burden on schools, colleges and students; and (ii) allowing schools and colleges to use existing assessment practices to gather evidence to support resilience in the exam system. It drew on feedback received, including from discussions with stakeholders, and from correspondence received from a range of people and organisations, on the contingency arrangements in place in 2022. The proposed guidance covered the steps schools, colleges and teachers should take in the coming months so that students would have sufficient evidence in place on which TAGs could be based.

The proposed guidance particularly focused on encouraging schools to use their existing assessment arrangements as far as possible and emphasised the need to avoid over-assessment. In particular, the proposed guidance did not suggest how frequently schools and colleges should assess students. Instead, it set out that it would be for schools and colleges to determine whether the evidence gathered was sufficient for them to be confident that, taken together, it would provide for an appropriate assessment of their students' knowledge, understanding and skills.

Decisions on providing guidance

Overall, almost three-quarters of respondents agreed that the guidance would be helpful in guiding schools and colleges to collect and retain evidence in a proportionate way, in line with their existing arrangements. While the majority of respondents agreed that the proposed guidance was helpful, views were mixed on whether it minimised any additional burden on schools and colleges, and students, beyond existing assessment arrangements already in place in centres.

Among those who felt that the guidance was not helpful, a number of

respondents suggested that having any arrangements in place to gather evidence would be disproportionate, given that we have entered a post-pandemic period and the risk posed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has reduced. On this point, while the government is clear that the cancellation of exams due to COVID-19 is now very unlikely, the past 3 years have highlighted the need to ensure that there is appropriate resilience in the exam system to manage exceptional circumstances. The proposed arrangements are not only a response to the pandemic, but also aim to build resilience in the exam system should there be any event, such as a pandemic, with such severe consequences that would necessitate the cancellation of exams.

Ofqual has decided to publish guidance for teachers on how to collect evidence of students' performance so that it can be used should TAGs be needed. Ofqual took this decision following confirmation from the DfE that, having considered responses to the consultation, it would be appropriate to provide such guidance. It also took this decision in light of the full range of responses to the consultation, including the equality and regulatory impact assessments carried out and discussed below.

Revisions to improve the guidance

In response to consultation feedback, Ofqual has made changes to the guidance to make it clearer and more helpful. Specifically, some respondents highlighted that the proposed guidance focused on exam-based subjects, rather than those with non-exam assessment (NEA). Ofqual has, therefore, added to the guidance that teachers of subjects with NEA should support students to complete NEA as far as possible, and that it would be used as evidence should exams not go ahead as planned.

There were also concerns raised about the need, wherever possible, to assess all students at the same time, or if this is not possible, to use different assessments at different times. We remain of the view that it is important for schools and colleges to do this as far as is possible. This avoids potential unfairness should some students sit assessments at a later time and become aware of the questions on which they will be assessed. Ofqual has, however, addressed concerns raised about potential resource implications. Ofqual has highlighted in final guidance that while the expectation is that schools and colleges will, in the majority of cases, do this by setting different questions, where this is not possible the focus should be

on ensuring that students are not able to predict the questions they will be asked.

There was a strong feeling among some teachers and others in schools and colleges that retaining a copy of the evidence was burdensome and costly. While we note these concerns, we believe that it is important that the evidence is kept. We do, however, also understand the importance of work being shared with students as part of teaching and the formative assessment process. Some respondents suggested that it would be better for just a sample of evidence to be retained across all students in a school or college. This might, however, limit any quality assurance that could be required should such TAGs be needed. Ofqual acknowledges these concerns and has revised the guidance to explain that evidence may be kept digitally or physically.

Some respondents, predominantly teachers, expressed concerns that there was some conflict between the content of the guidance and the aim that schools should be able to plan assessment opportunities in line with their existing approaches.

Both Ofqual and the DfE agree it is important that the guidance enables schools to use their normal formative assessment approaches to gather evidence. It is, however, important that the guidance is clear and balances this flexibility with providing some consistency of approach. We are also keen to balance this with reducing burdens on schools, colleges and students. As there is already flexibility built into the guidance, we believe the approach is proportionate.

There were some misconceptions that the proposed guidance suggested that schools and colleges would need to provide a greater number of assessment opportunities over the year than would normally be the case. The proposed guidance was clear that schools and colleges should align with their existing approaches as far as possible. It did not specify a minimum number of assessments.

The proposed guidance was also clear that assessments should be based on exam board materials as far as possible. Schools and colleges, therefore, do not need to create their own materials.

Some other points made in the consultation, as outlined in the analysis

document, related to misconceptions and a misunderstanding of the guidance. Ofqual has, therefore, made some small changes to make the guidance clearer. The final guidance makes it clear that students would be able to repeat assessments, where the repeated assessments were not for the purpose of evidence collection.

In addition, in response to concerns that the nature of assessments might be changed when used for evidence collection, the final guidance also emphasises that students are able to complete other assessments across the year that are not for the purpose of evidence collection. Ofqual has clarified that students should normally only be assessed on the content that they have been taught. The final guidance also explains how to treat students who move centres during the academic year.

Longer-term perspectives

The consultation asked for initial views on whether the proposed guidance for 2023 could be adopted in the longer term. Over two-thirds of respondents supported guidance being in place for the longer term. As outlined in the consultation, we plan to keep this decision under review and will consider consulting again in the summer term on any possible proposals for the longer term.

Arrangements for private candidates

The consultation explained that private candidates do not study within the school, college, or other exam centre (such as a private tutorial college) where they take their exams. Private candidates can be home educated, or students who are re-taking a qualification having left the school or college with which they originally studied, or in other circumstances, for example, adults studying with a distance learning provider. Private candidates register with a school, college, or other type of exam centre, which arranges for the candidate to take their exams alongside their students. As exams are taking place in 2023, private candidates should register with a centre to sit exams

in 2023 in the usual way.

A significant number of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that the guidance would be the best approach for private candidates, with 46% strongly agreeing or agreeing. Thirteen per cent of respondents, however, strongly disagreed. These respondents mainly suggested that the arrangements would be unfair, saying that either they would advantage or disadvantage private candidates.

Among those who disagreed, a number suggested that there needed to be more specific guidance on how to gather evidence for private candidates. As one respondent noted, however, the circumstances of private candidates can by their nature be significantly varied. We, therefore, do not believe it would be possible to provide further and more specific guidance that would both give the greater direction that some were seeking, while at the same time be sufficiently flexible to take account of the different circumstances of these students.

A number of respondents suggested that there should be guaranteed support for private candidates should exams not go ahead. In the unlikely event that exams are cancelled, the DfE would consider options to support private candidates and explore ways to encourage centres to work with them.

Equalities impact assessment

We considered whether the proposals in the consultation might impact positively or negatively on students with protected characteristics. We set out these considerations in the equality impact assessment included in the consultation and invited views on those, on impacts we may not have identified and on ways to mitigate them.

Sixty-four per cent of respondents said that the arrangements would not have a negative impact on particular groups of students. The majority of those who responded to this question on the consultation also said that they could have a positive impact on particular groups of students.

Some respondents who said the proposals would have a negative impact

commented on the risk of unconscious bias by teachers determining TAGs for pupils with one or more particular protected characteristics. Respondents felt that provision of suitable training, anonymised marking and increased scrutiny would help to mitigate this.

On this point, it is important to note that teachers are not currently being asked to determine TAGs. Teachers would be asked to do so only in the unlikely event that exams were cancelled and would then be provided with guidance to support the TAG process. Ofqual provided guidance to schools and colleges on how to make objective assessments in both 2020 and 2021. Should teachers be required to determine TAGs, Ofqual would again provide similar guidance on making objective assessments, drawing on any lessons learned from 2021. Ofqual would also help students understand how they can raise concerns if they think they have evidence of discrimination against them. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) provided training in 2021 and we would expect them to do so again if timing allowed in 2023.

Some respondents raised the risk that some students could be absent for the assessments, and that the likelihood of being absent might be higher for some students, including some disabled students, and Gypsy, Roma or Traveller students. The published guidance is clear that, in exceptional circumstances, it might be necessary to determine a TAG using work carried out before the guidance was published, or collected after any decision that exams could not take place.

A few respondents noted that disabled candidates are likely to be disproportionately represented among private candidates. We believe that ethnic minority students are also likely to be disproportionately represented in private candidate entries for some foreign language qualifications. Some respondents raised concerns about private candidates finding centres to be able to be assessed during the academic year.

We highlighted in the consultation that private candidates would be able to seek to work with a centre with which they already had a relationship, or which was willing to undertake assessments across a period of time for this purpose. Alternatively, private candidates might complete assessments over a more condensed period were exams cancelled. Should exams be cancelled on public health grounds with the result that it is not possible to sit

assessments within centres, this might present the risk that private candidates are unable to be assessed. The regulatory arrangements put in place for TAGs in 2021 did not, however, prevent centres from relying on evidence from assessments that had been conducted remotely. Ofqual would therefore not anticipate setting any such restriction if TAGs become necessary in 2023. We acknowledge the greater difficulties that private candidates may face compared with students who are studying in the centre where they will take their exams. The flexibility of the confirmed approach should, however, help private candidates to produce the evidence necessary for a centre to provide them with a TAG should exams be cancelled.

Some respondents felt that the need to take additional assessments to inform a TAG could negatively impact private candidates with Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) because of the resource needed to provide additional assessments and any associated reasonable adjustments. Respondents suggested this could make it more difficult for private candidates with SEND to find a centre, and that this may lead to anxiety which could disadvantage this group of students.

The proposed guidance allowed some flexibility in the approach to how students are assessed which would help to alleviate these concerns. For example, it explained that pupils could be assessed in a classroom setting and need not take a whole exam paper in one sitting. This could reduce the risk that private candidates with SEND could have difficulties in finding a centre with which to work.

Some respondents noted concerns regarding reasonable adjustments for disabled students more widely. On this point, centres have a responsibility under the Equality Act 2010 to put in place reasonable adjustments for disabled students. The proposed guidance highlighted that reasonable adjustments should be made for disabled students when taking assessments where evidence is being collected and retained.

Some respondents also raised concerns that the appropriate adjustments might not be in place for assessments that take place outside formal exams. For example, students might use these as an opportunity to identify the adjustment that would best support them to demonstrate what they know, understand and can do in assessments. The proposed guidance was clear on this. It set out that if, for any reason, students are assessed without an

appropriate reasonable adjustment being in place, centres would need to record this, along with the reason that this was not in place. It also explained that, if a student's need for a reasonable adjustment is only identified after an assessment has taken place, their teacher should record the reason for this late identification. They should also where possible, allow the student to undertake a different, but equivalent, assessment with the reasonable adjustment in place. The published guidance retains these points.

Respondents cited students' mental health as a common concern in relation to the gathering of evidence, both in relation to students sitting exams in general, but also suggesting that this impact could be greater for SEND students. Some respondents suggested that having assessments spread over a longer period could have a greater negative impact on some disabled students.

The proposed approach was designed to minimise anxiety for students. For example, it did not give a specific number of occasions or timings for assessments to take place and was clear that the total assessment time should not normally exceed the total exam time for the specification. The guidance specifically said that schools and colleges should guard against over-assessment, and that assessments should help prepare students for formal assessments and help to reduce anxiety in the run up to exams. Ofqual additionally plans to provide clear, accessible information to students on this matter. It is also important to note, however, that the regulatory approach cannot itself fully mitigate the impacts on students' mental health caused by concerns that individual students have about taking assessments. The published guidance has, therefore, not been changed in these areas.

There were a small number of respondents that highlighted concerns about specific groups of students. For example, there was a suggestion that boys may be negatively affected compared to girls, as it was suggested that they may be more likely to leave revision until later in the year. It is clear in the published guidance that students should be told in advance of any assessments that they could be used to inform a TAG in the unlikely event that exams cannot take place.

There was also the suggestion that disadvantaged students may be

disproportionately impacted as they may be more likely to have missed teaching time. This is beyond the scope of this consultation. The role of qualifications is to link higher grades with higher standards of performance. As such, none of the options available can remove fully the way the disruption to a student's education might have an impact on the grade they will receive.

As well as publishing guidance for schools and colleges on collecting evidence to inform TAGs should they be needed, Ofqual plans to require exam boards to make sure that schools and colleges are made aware of the published guidance, as it did for the last academic year.

Ofqual will also be publishing information for students on the arrangements being put in place for exam resilience, including information specifically for private candidates. In the unlikely event that exams are cancelled, we will make sure additional information on how grades will be determined is accessible to the wide range of student groups in different formats. Centres and exam boards are required to comply with their obligations under the Equality Act 2010, however grades are awarded. Exam boards will also continue to be subject to Ofqual's regulatory requirements to comply with equalities law.

Regulatory impact assessment

A key theme in the responses to the consultation was the impact on teacher workload of creating, marking and moderating assessments. A number of responses suggested an increase in staffing costs as a result. In particular, some respondents suggested that preparing for both exams and TAGs would create additional pressure on teachers.

As outlined above, the proposed guidance set out how teachers should collect evidence to inform TAGs in the event that exams are cancelled but was clear that teachers should not take any steps to determine TAGs unless exams are cancelled. The proposed guidance aimed to enable schools and colleges to put in place arrangements that work best for them and their students. It strongly encouraged the use of the normal formative assessment arrangements (for example mock exams) that schools and

colleges would, in any case, be carrying out whenever appropriate. The published guidance remains unchanged in these areas.

Some respondents, in particular school and college staff, also focused on the material costs of implementing arrangements, such as the costs of copying and storing evidence, the costs of external invigilation and cover costs for standardisation processes.

On this point, it should be noted that schools and colleges do not have to use external invigilation and changes have been made to the published guidance to clarify this. The guidance states that the conditions under which assessments take place should be broadly similar to those for summer exams, to minimise burden and the impact on resources. It also clarifies that assessments can take place in a classroom rather than an exam hall setting.

The government believes that it is very unlikely that exams will not go ahead as planned in 2023. This was reflected in the proposed guidance, which was scaled back from the arrangements in place in 2022 to allow greater flexibility and minimise burden on schools, colleges, and students. As schools were advised to follow their existing assessment arrangements as far as possible, any additional costs incurred should be minimised. We recognise, however, that there will still be some costs involved in gathering evidence that could be used should exams not be able to go ahead. We consider the costs to be proportionate to the aim of preparing for the eventuality that exams cannot go ahead for any reason, having learnt from the experiences of the past 3 years. The DfE will continue to monitor schools' financial health and the cost pressures they face.

Some respondents also suggested that greater costs could be incurred to support students who need reasonable adjustments and other access arrangements, such as further increased staffing costs and the need for additional rooms. As outlined above, the proposed (and also the published) guidance set out that, as far as possible, schools and colleges should align the process for collecting evidence with their existing planned assessments. Schools and colleges should normally already provide reasonable adjustments for students as part of their existing approaches to formative assessment. We believe that any potential costs to support reasonable adjustments and other access arrangements would therefore be limited and proportionate.

Some respondents suggested that the burden on schools and colleges could be reduced by exam boards providing additional assessment materials, including mark schemes and exemplar grade boundaries. On this point, it is important to note that for all subjects in scope there are now a range of past papers and other assessment materials available. In the event of exams being cancelled, the nature and extent of additional support provided by exam boards would take account of the timing of and the reason for the decision to cancel exams.

A few respondents believed that delivery of the proposed contingency arrangements would impact on available teaching time. The proposed guidance strongly encouraged the use of the normal formative assessment arrangements that schools and colleges would, in any case, be carrying out whenever appropriate, to inform teaching and learning, and prepare students for assessments in the summer. The proposed guidance was clear that teachers should guard against over-assessment and did not outline the number of assessment opportunities that should be in place. It also suggested that schools and colleges should seek to put in place arrangements that best suit their teachers and students. The published guidance is unchanged in this regard.

Exam boards suggested that there would be minimal additional costs incurred by them in relation to these proposals, should exams go ahead. They noted that costs would increase should exams not go ahead as planned, with increased costs for systems development, quality assurance and appeals processes. Exam boards did not suggest any cost savings for the arrangements in place, though there would likely be a number of cost savings, such as printing and marking should exams not go ahead as planned. One exam board noted that any costs and savings would depend on the timing of any cancellation.

[Back to top](#)

Is this page useful?

Yes

No

[Report a problem with this page](#)

Topics

Government activity

[Benefits](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Departments](#)

[Births, death, marriages and care](#)

[Employing people](#)

[News](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Cost of living support](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Transparency](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[How government works](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

[Get involved](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Help](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility statement](#) [Contact](#) [Terms and conditions](#)

[Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#) [Government Digital Service](#)

All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



© Crown copyright