



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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To students taking exams 2021

I am writing to you today because I know that you have faced unprecedented disruption to your education this year due to the pandemic.

Exams can be daunting at the best of times, but a global pandemic has the potential to make exams in 2021 even more challenging. I know that many of you have lost a substantial amount of time at school or college due to the pandemic and that you are working hard to catch-up.

On that basis, some of you might think that we should cancel exams next year and I sympathise with that viewpoint. However, I think that would be the wrong thing to do. Let me explain why.

Whilst they are stressful, exams are the best way for you to demonstrate what you know and can do. They offer you a fair, independent opportunity to demonstrate your abilities and give you control over your future and what you can achieve.

I previously announced that exams will go ahead next year – with most AS, A levels and GCSEs starting three weeks later than normal. This will provide you with some extra time to learn and revise for your exams – which I hope will help you to catch-up on some of the learning that you may have missed.

Today I am announcing additional measures that will help you to prepare for exams and hopefully make them less daunting. These measures will reflect the disruption you have experienced, ensure that exams are as fair as possible and enable you to get the qualifications that you deserve to progress to the next stage in your lives.

Measures to support you in your learning

We know that you have faced challenges this year that students would not normally have to deal with. Therefore, the exams regulator, Ofqual has determined that grading for 2021 GCSE, AS and A level exams will be aligned with the outcomes from 2020, meaning that you will not be disadvantaged relative to grades awarded this summer. Ofqual is also working to ensure that there is a fair approach across vocational and technical qualifications.

To help you best focus your efforts between now and the exams, awarding organisations will give you and your teachers advance notice of some of the topics to be covered in your exam papers. This will help you focus on these areas and target your revision in the run up to exams. For some subjects, exam support materials will be available to you on the day of exams (such as formulae sheets) – so you will not need to memorise all the information you normally would. Ofqual will publish further details on this in the spring term.

For those of you taking vocational and technical qualifications, we are announcing further flexibilities to reduce the number of assessments for many qualifications. This will free up time for you to focus on the areas you need to.

All these measures are designed to make sure that exams are as fair as possible and to maximise your opportunity to do well in them. I intend for as many of you as possible to be able sit exams in the usual way. However, we have planned for all eventualities and we are putting a range of contingency measures in place for anyone who could be affected by the pandemic.

Contingency measures for exams 2021

We are exploring how coronavirus testing developments can help to ensure that you can sit your exams safely, should you otherwise need to self-isolate. If you legitimately miss one or all your exams in a subject due to the pandemic, there will still be ways for you to obtain a qualification.

If you legitimately miss one or more of your assessments, but had completed a sufficient proportion of a qualification, then the existing special consideration process will be used to award a grade.

If you legitimately miss all your exam papers in a GCSE, AS or A Level subject, you will be given an opportunity to sit a contingency paper held shortly after the main summer series, in early July. For the likely small minority of you who might legitimately miss the main series and the contingency paper for a subject, you will have an opportunity to be awarded a grade based on a validated teacher assessment.

A similar approach will be followed for vocational and technical qualifications and other general qualifications.

Our commitment to making exams fair and safe

I want you to know that everyone in government, from the Prime Minister down, understands the challenges you have experienced this year due to the pandemic.

In this extraordinary year, we are committed to giving you the best opportunity possible to demonstrate your abilities, to get the grades you deserve and to progress to the next stage of your lives.

I would personally like to wish you the very best with your studies and your exams and I look forward to congratulating you all on your achievements come results day.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', written in a cursive style.

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Secretary of State for Education



Exams 2021: parents Q&A

Pupils all over the country have had their schooling disrupted by the pandemic and we know this has had an impact on their learning and progress.

That's why we've set out a [package of measures](#) designed to support students and deliver next year's summer exams in the fairest way possible. This includes making grading more generous for students than a normal year, advance notice of exam topic areas, exam support materials like formula sheets, and more.

Here we answer your questions on what these measures mean for students, teachers, and parents.

My child has missed months of school because of the pandemic – how is it fair for them to sit an exam just like any other year?

This won't be like every other year. Unlike other years, teachers and students will get advance notice of the topic areas in many of the exams and they will be able to take things like formula tables in with them on the day. This will make the exams less stressful for students and help them prepare.

The exams will also be graded more generously to recognise how difficult this year has been for students. This means more students are more likely to receive the top grades than in a normal year.

If disruption continues and if it affects some areas more than others, will you make further changes to exams and grading next year?

Yes, that's a possibility. An Expert Panel has been set up to monitor disruption. They will be able to make further recommendations. Ideas they will consider include a system of 'flagging' grades to Universities and Colleges if students have been adversely affected.

Does advance notice mean you'll be telling students what the questions will be?

No. In some cases they will be told the topic areas that will come up – but not the questions themselves. Doing this will help pupils and teachers to focus revision and attention on the areas they will be tested on. This won't look the same for all subjects, but the vast majority of subjects will have adaptations like exam support materials, for example formula sheets in maths, or advance notice of topics.

Does that mean my child won't have to learn some of the content because they know it isn't going to be in the exam?

No, pupils should still get to learn the full breadth of the curriculum. Advance notice of topic areas and details of the exam support materials to be provided won't be available until the new year so we expect schools to cover the full curriculum in that time, preparing students for their next steps.

After that they will be told more about the support materials they will have and topics that will be included in the exams so they can focus their revision.

What happens if my child is isolating or ill when the exam comes round?

Students who miss part of their exams because of the pandemic will be able to get a grade through what's called special consideration, which is a process we use each year for students who miss exams.

Special consideration is an adjustment to a student's mark or grade made after exams. It's based on things like coursework and if the student has done other exams in the subject.

Students who miss all their exams and don't have enough non-exam assessment completed to use the special consideration process will be eligible to take a contingency exam paper, which is like a backup exam. Contingency papers will have different questions, but will be broadly similar to the normal exams, so students aren't faced with a totally unfamiliar paper.

My child is extremely vulnerable to covid and has been shielding. It would be risky for them to sit an exam with other pupils so what should they do?

Every year, a small number of students can't sit exams at school. In these cases, they can work with their school to arrange to take exams at home with invigilation. We expect this to

be possible for clinically extremely vulnerable pupils who have been advised not to attend school, though it's best to work through the exact situation via the school.

It isn't just secondary school pupils who have missed time – my child is in primary school will they still have to do SATs?

Pupils will not have to sit the same tests they would sit in a normal year. The key stage 1 tests in English reading and maths and the English grammar, punctuation and spelling test at key stage 1 and 2 will be removed for one year.

We are keeping some assessments though, because it is important for us to be able to understand the progress pupils are making. Primary assessments in summer 2021 will be focused on the phonics screening check, teacher assessment in English reading, writing and mathematics at key stage 1, tests in English reading and mathematics and teacher assessment in English writing at key stage 2.

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