

Extra measures to support students ahead of next summer's exams

Students sitting exams and other assessments next year will benefit from a package of exceptional measures to make them as fair as possible and manage the disruption caused by Covid-19, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson announced today (Thursday 3 December).

In recognition of the challenges faced by students this year, grades will be more generous, students will be given advance notice of some topic areas, and steps will be taken to ensure every student receives a grade, even if they miss a paper due to self-isolation or illness.

The Government has been clear that exams are the fairest way to judge a student's performance and has made keeping schools and colleges open a national priority throughout the pandemic in order to minimise disruption to education.

Building on the three-week delay to exams to free up extra teaching time announced in October, the new measures include:

- more generous grading than usual, in line with national outcomes from 2020, so students this year are not disadvantaged;
- students receiving advance notice of some topic areas covered in GCSE, AS and A levels to focus revision;
- exam aids – like formula sheets – provided in some exams giving students more confidence and reducing the amount of information they need to memorise;
- additional exams to give students a second chance to sit a paper if the main exams or assessments are missed due to illness or self-isolation; and
- a new expert group to look at differential learning and monitor the variation in the impact of the pandemic on students across the country.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Exams are the best way of giving young people the opportunity to show what they can do which is why it's so important they take place next summer.

But this isn't business as usual. I know students are facing unprecedented disruption to their learning. That's why exams will be different next year, taking exceptional steps to ensure they are as fair as possible.

I am determined to support students, parents and teachers in these unprecedented times and hope measures like more generous grading and advance notice of some topic areas will give young people the clarity and confidence they need to achieve every success.

Today's steps follow extensive engagement with Ofqual, exam boards and senior leaders across the education sector.

The measures recognise that while teachers have gone above and beyond to support their pupils during a difficult period, some young people have had their teaching disrupted more than others and will need extra support to catch up on the curriculum and achieve their potential in exams.

In these instances, receiving advance notice of some topic areas and being given exam aids will support students and ensure they can move on to their next stage of education, training or employment with the grades they deserve.

Students taking vocational and technical qualifications will also see adaptations to ensure parity between general and vocational qualifications. Some vocational qualifications will require more varied adaptations due to the different qualification types.

The Government has also developed a series of contingency measures with Ofqual that will mean, even if students miss one or more exams due to self-isolation or sickness but have still completed a proportion of their qualification they will still receive a grade.

If a student misses all their assessments in a subject, they will have the opportunity to sit a contingency paper held shortly after the main exams. In the extreme case where a student has a legitimate reason to miss all their papers, then a validated teacher informed assessment can be used, only once all chances to sit an exam have passed.

The Government will set out further detail on this process, and on adaptations to exams, in the new year.

The Government has also announced that full, graded Ofsted inspections will not resume until the summer term.

In the interim, Ofsted will conduct supportive monitoring inspections to those schools and colleges currently judged "inadequate" and some that "require improvement". These inspections will focus on important issues like curriculum, remote education and pupil attendance, particularly of vulnerable children.

Ofsted will also continue to have the power to inspect a school, further education or early years provider, if they have serious concerns, including about safeguarding and remote education.

John Jolly, Chief Executive, Parentkind, said:

We welcome the clarity that the Department is providing for parents of young people preparing to take their exams in summer 2021. Parents have told us that the uncertainty over arrangements for exams has been a source of concern and anxiety for both them and their children.

Parents and young people will be relieved to have a clearer sense of what the arrangements are and how this will ensure that individual circumstances are taken into account. At Parentkind we will continue to raise parents' questions about the arrangements going forward.

Leora Cruddas, Chief Executive, Confederation of School Trusts, said:

Given the disruption to teaching last year, as well as the likelihood of ongoing disruption this year, it is increasingly likely that large numbers of students will not be able to cover all the content needed for examinations, as they would in a normal year.

These steps help students feel confident about their exams as an important step towards making the system as fair as possible.

Test and exam results will not be included in performance tables this year, and instead will be replaced by attendance information, and student destinations and the subjects taken at key stage 4 and 5.

These changes take account of the challenges posed by the pandemic but will ensure parents still have access to vital information about their local school.

The Government has also reviewed remote education guidance and published updated expectations to provide further clarity for schools, colleges, parents and pupils. Primary schools are expected to provide a minimum of three hours a day on average of remote education, with secondary schools expected to provide at least four hours' worth.

Similar expectations will apply for colleges and other further education providers which take into account the sector's role in delivering both academic and technical provision.

For primary assessments, key stage 1 tests in English reading and mathematics, and the English grammar, punctuation and spelling tests at key stage 1 and 2 will be removed for one year, in recognition of the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Schools can take a flexible approach to the administration of the key stage 2 tests and phonics screening check, by extending the original timetable by a week, until 26 May and 25 June, respectively.

Although primary performance data will not be published, teacher assessment in English reading, writing and mathematics at key stage 1, and all other assessments at key stage 2, will remain. These measures will help to understand pupils' lost time in education and support those that need it most, providing vital information to parents and assisting with pupils' transition to secondary schools.

Martyn Oliver, Chief Executive of Outwood Grange Academy Trust, said:

As a Trust which supports 39 schools in the North of England, of which 35 are located within a Tier 3 region since the national restrictions ended, our focus has been and remains on how children who have faced unprecedented disruption will be treated fairly.

By running exams with these measures and committing to looking at the differential loss of learning, our children and their parents can feel assured work to level-up is serious.

Ian Pryce, Chief Executive of Bedford College, said:

The Department and Ofqual have consulted genuinely, widely and seriously and I hope this will reassure students, parents and teachers.

Great care is being taken to ensure students will have an opportunity to sit their exams; will have longer to prepare, and will be given information and options to help them achieve even where they have seen a reduction in face-to-face teaching.

Maintaining overall standards roughly at last year's level recognises the variability of the experience of different students. It is the appropriate decision and will help students achieve a good outcome.

Lesley Powell CBE, Chief Executive of North East Learning Trust:

The measures put in place offer a sensible and pragmatic route through the wake of COVID disruption and offer staff and students a clear target for next year.

The approach covers a range of contingencies that will hopefully instill confidence in the exam process and reduce stress for everyone involved. Exams are an important aspect of children's educational experience, and indeed of growing up; allowing these to continue, in as fair a way as possible, I strongly believe is the right thing to do.