

Ian Bauckham CBE at the Schools and Academies Show 2022

Thank you for that kind introduction. It is a great pleasure to be here with you and able to speak about examinations in my role as chair of Ofqual.

I am going start by saying something about examinations in 2023 and then end by reflecting briefly on the future of examinations, especially in the light of increasing digitisation.

Exams and other formal assessments that are like exams give students the fairest chance to show what they know, understand and can do, because the rules are the same for everyone.

And at Ofqual it's students' interests that drive our decisions; both this year's students, and past and future students. For us, that means qualifications that maintain their value, now and in the future, and stand the test of time.

We've done a lot of canvassing of opinion from students in schools and colleges, their parents and their teachers. And all of those groups tell us the same message: overwhelming positivity about the return to normal examinations after the difficult arrangements of the COVID-19 years.

This is certainly my own experience from the young people I talk to as a trust leader and around the country.

Examinations in 2023

This summer was an important step back towards normality. Our plans for 2023 take us a step further, whilst also recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have already announced that, in 2023, as well as running examinations pretty much as normal we will also return to pre-pandemic grading.

In so doing, however, we're going to provide the 2023 cohort with the same protections against any impact of COVID-19 disruption that we did for earlier cohorts during the reform years. This feels like the right thing to do.

Students in the 2023 cohort have not, during their examination courses, experienced national school or college closures, but we do know they have experienced some disruption, and certainly earlier on in their schooling disruption was evident.

So to achieve that extra bit of protection we are putting in place the same safeguards that were used for the first cohorts of students taking reformed GCSEs and A levels from 2017 onwards.

That meant not disadvantaging students who might have performed less well because they were the first to sit new exams.

So let's just have a slightly closer look at what this means in practice.

As in any year, grade boundaries for every specification will be set by senior examiners after they have reviewed the work produced by students in their exams.

But those senior examiners will be guided in their decisions about where to set grade boundaries by information about the grades achieved in pre-pandemic years, along with prior attainment data.

That means the 2023 cohort will be protected in grading terms if their exam performance is a little lower than it might have been before the pandemic.

Broadly speaking, therefore, a typical student who would have achieved an A grade in their A level geography before the pandemic will be just as likely to get an A next summer, even if their performance in the assessments is a little weaker in 2023 than it would have been before the pandemic.

We do expect therefore that overall results in 2023 will be much closer to the pre-pandemic years than results since 2020.

In other words, overall national results in 2023 will be lower than in 2022. Individual schools and colleges should be prepared for this.

We always said that this year, 2022, was a 'one off' transition year. If you are in a school or college, it is very misleading to compare your results in 2022 with any other year.

And looking ahead to next year, lower results in 2023 compared with 2022 will not mean, by itself, that your school's or college's performance has fallen. It will be much more likely to be a reflection of the return nationally to normal grading standards.

I know as a school leader that it can feel worrying when results come in lower than the previous year. But to repeat: we should not compare 2023 results with 2022, and certainly not with 2020 or 2021 when we had no exams at all.

Now obviously at this point in the academic year, we can't be precise about results in specific subjects and specifications. Entries have not yet been made and students have not taken any exams.

But it is important to note that, as I have said, while broadly speaking we aim to return to normal grading in 2023, there is no pre-determined 'quota' of grades.

There will always be variations because marks and grades are determined by candidates' performance and expert examiner judgement of that performance as they decide where exactly grade boundaries should be for each examination.

Alongside this approach to grading, i.e. a broad return to normal with some safeguards to protect students, we have also consulted on a couple of specific changes to continue to give students a bit more support in the experience of taking exams in 2023.

The first one I want to mention this morning concerns MFL – modern foreign languages – GCSEs where we propose not requiring exams to contain vocabulary from outside the vocabulary list, and allowing exam boards to supply meanings for any words that they do use from outside that list. And that will in any case be in line with changes to GCSEs in French, German and Spanish coming down the line.

And the second specific I wanted to flag this morning is the consultation that we have recently done on students being given formulae sheets for maths and equation sheets for science, which we did this year for science GCSEs. If we implement that proposal, like the MFL changes, it would also give some additional reassurance to GCSE candidates in the examination itself.

We will publish the outcome of these consultations and final decisions very soon.

Just a word on vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) taken in schools and colleges, alongside or instead of GCSEs and A levels. For these, awarding organisations are expected to take account of the approach being used in GCSEs and A levels so that students taking VTQs are not advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison. So for the VTQ suite of qualifications, this also means in 2023 a return to normal standards.

Teachers this term are predicting grades for their students to use in their UCAS applications. Indeed, many students will already have been given an indication of their predicted grades by their teachers.

It can – and I know this as a teacher – be challenging for teachers to predict grades accurately at the best of times. In summer 2022, predicted grades overall, at national level, were at their highest level ever.

We expect predicted grades for summer 2023 to be much closer to those seen in the pre-pandemic years. For 2023, we have recommended that teachers use the familiar pre-pandemic standard as the basis for predicting their students' grades.

But there is one note of caution: if you are using summer 2022 papers as mock or trial exams, either this autumn or in the spring, be aware that the grade boundaries you have for those were set with the higher 2022 transition grading standard in mind. You will need to factor that in when giving indicative grades for candidates being examined from 2023 onwards.

Just another word about universities and higher education: decisions about grading have no effect on the quantum of higher education places available. That is not affected by grading decisions.

Universities themselves will take account of how exams will be graded when they make their offers, including any differences between the 4 nations of

the UK (which already exist). They are already well experienced in making those adjustments.

The future of examinations

I want to turn now to the future of examinations, in particular in the light of the digital revolution which is playing out in so many aspects of our lives.

It is worth saying up front that it is not Ofqual's job to be an evangelist for technology as an end in itself. Our job is to regulate the exams and qualifications market to make sure it works fairly in the interests of young people, and that qualifications have value and can be trusted.

However, greater use of technology in GCSEs, A levels and other high-stakes exams is coming down the track and it's probably a case of when, not if. We know it's happening in other aspects of life and it's happening in other countries.

But we must be led by the evidence and do only what is right for students. We cannot take risks with young people's qualifications and we must have regard to robust evidence, always thinking, as a priority, about the situation of the most disadvantaged students to ensure they have a fair crack of the whip.

That's why we have committed to undertake considered and thorough work to look at the opportunities, challenges, risks and benefits of technology in assessment.

So if exam boards tell us they want to use technology for some aspect of their examinations, we need, as a regulator, already to have done the spade work to know what we should expect from exam boards to make sure they use technology well, and fairly, and in the interests of all students. There is a lot for us to understand to make sure we can make those decisions well.

Awarding organisations and government will be thinking about things like how to develop onscreen assessment platforms, and the practical but all-important requirement of ensuring reliable broadband connections are available for every school, because they will need that if they are going to do live, onscreen assessment.

But as a regulator our approach will be cautious. What we will be doing at every turn is considering the evidence, and considering in particular students' interests, and keeping that at the forefront of our decision-making.

I have to say that I do not personally envisage a world where students sit exams solely onscreen. Handwriting is still an essential part of our education and is probably best assessed with pen and paper.

The benefits of possible future onscreen assessment are likely to vary by subject. In maths, it may be that it is easier to use pen and paper to show workings. Computer programming, however, is both an essential skill for the

future economy and probably one we can all agree is better assessed on a computer.

There will be others too where onscreen assessment enables more valid, realistic and accurate assessment. But we just need to understand all of that properly and make cautious and wise decisions for the system as a whole, keeping students' interests at the forefront of our minds.

There are further benefits to onscreen assessments. For example, onscreen assessments may make exams more accessible for some candidates with special education needs and disabilities (SEND). It might also make it easier to make adjustments for pupils who are entitled to them digitally rather than on paper.

The move to digital assessment, however, can only come about through joint endeavour. It will take schools, teachers, parents, exam boards, the Department for Education, Ofqual and others to work together. We will need to make a detailed and sober assessment of risks and benefits, and not experiment with young people's futures.

And as the successful return of exams this summer has shown, doing that sort of joint endeavour is well within our grasp.