

Ofqual's approach to grading exams and assessments in summer 2022 and autumn 2021

Overview

Ofqual has statutory objectives to maintain standards and promote public confidence in exams and qualifications. We also have a duty to have regard to the interests of learners, which we interpret as fairness. We want to get back quickly to the pre-pandemic standard, but in the interests of fairness, and balancing these objectives, we won't do so in one jump. Instead, 2022 will be a transition year to reflect that we are in a pandemic recovery period and students' education has been disrupted. In 2022 we will aim, therefore, to reflect a midway point between 2021 and 2019. In 2023 we aim to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years.

This approach will recognise the disruption experienced by students taking exams in 2022, over their course of study, and so provide a safety net for those who might otherwise just miss out on a higher grade. Results overall will be higher than in 2019, but not as high as in 2020.

As usual, our rules will require exam boards to use a range of qualitative and quantitative evidence so that grade boundaries are set in a way that is as fair as possible for all students, across all subjects and exam boards. Grading is monitored by the experts every step of the way. And, as usual, we will review results for every subject before they are issued.

Background

For the past 2 years, summer exams haven't been able to take place and, instead, students have been awarded grades by their teachers.

In summer 2020, the government decided that exams could not take place safely. As the pandemic continued it disrupted education to such an extent, and so unevenly, that government decided it would have been unfair to ask students to sit exams as they normally would in summer 2021, given the differences in the amount of the curriculum that different schools and colleges had been able to teach.

Using grades assessed by teachers and checked by centres was the right thing to do in the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. It meant students could receive grades and move on with their lives, and their grades took account of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

Adaptations for 2022

Arrangements have been put in place for summer 2022 to support students and make exams fairer for them. The government has introduced a choice of topics or content in some GCSE exams and exam boards will give advance information about the focus of the content of exams, designed to provide guidance for revision for students ahead of summer exams, and study aids will be allowed in some exams.

How we will provide a grading safety net

As we return to summer exams, in 2022 exam boards will set the grade boundaries based on a profile that reflects a midpoint between 2021 and pre-pandemic grading.

This will provide a safety net for students, to reflect the disruption this cohort have experienced already in their course and recognising the fact that, because of the pandemic, most A level students won't have taken public exams before.

Our aim is to return to a pre-pandemic grade profile. But we don't think it would be fair on 2022's students to do it all in one go, given the disruption they have experienced. We will aim, therefore, to return in broadly 2 steps.

As in any other year, exam boards will use data as a starting point, to align their standards in a subject. That will be based on an average of 2019 and 2021 results for each subject. But the grade boundaries for each specification will be set by the senior examiners, after they have reviewed the work produced by students.

Results overall will be higher than in 2019, and not as high as in 2020. The exact position may vary by subject and by grade. At this stage we can't be precise because schools and colleges haven't made entries yet – shifts in entry patterns can mean results look different, for example as more or fewer able students than in previous years enter for each subject – and of course senior examiners haven't reviewed any work because students haven't yet taken their exams. As in any year when students take exams, there is no pre-determined 'quota' of grades. This approach allows us to begin to re-establish pre-pandemic relationships between subjects.

Essentially, it's about being as fair as we can be to students. Students' learning has been disrupted due to the pandemic through no fault of their own, and our approach, will take account of that.

Our transitional, midpoint approach in 2022 will create a grade distribution that is generous compared to 2019 but as fair as possible to students. Grades will be based on how students have performed in exams: they will be meaningful and can be trusted by universities, colleges and employers.

Autumn 2021

A small number of students will take autumn exams starting next week. These exams, with the exception of the usual November sittings for GCSE English language and maths, are for those students who want to improve on their grade from summer 2021 or who had planned to enter in summer 2021 but were unable to obtain a teacher assessed grade. For this reason, exam boards will seek to align autumn 2021 grading with summer 2021. This is [the same approach we took in autumn 2020](#), when grading was aligned to summer 2020.

UCAS predicted grades

Teachers this term will be predicting the grades their students will receive in summer 2022 for use on their higher education applications. [In line with UCAS guidance](#), many students will already have been given an indication of their predicted grades by their teachers.

The UCAS guidance suggests that predicted grades should be aspirational but achievable and the guidance considers the risks of inflating predicted grades as well as the risks of suppressing them.

It is challenging for teachers to accurately predict grades at the best of times. In recent pre-pandemic years, overall grades have been generously predicted by teachers. For 2022, we recommend that teachers use the familiar 2019 standard as the basis for predicting their students' grades, giving borderline students the benefit of any doubt. So if a teacher believes a student is likely to be on the borderline between 2 grades, they predict the higher one.

Vocational and technical qualifications

The decision on the approach to grading GCSEs and A levels will have an impact on certain vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) used for similar purposes, including progressing to further study. Our regulatory framework requires awarding organisations to secure, as far as it is possible, that VTQ learners are not disadvantaged nor advantaged compared with their GCSE and A level peers. To do this we expect them to take account of the approach for GCSEs and A levels when setting standards in their own qualifications.

Conclusion

For the past 2 years, a higher proportion of students each year received top grades compared to pre-pandemic years. It's important that we get back to exams and other formal assessments, so that students have the fairest chance to show what they know, understand and can do, with all students taking the same assessments, which are set, marked and graded by the exam boards. And it's important that we start to move back to the position we were in before the pandemic to make sure we are setting young people up for university, college or employment in the best possible way.

Fairness has been foremost in our minds when thinking about exams this autumn and next year, with students' interests driving our decisions – both this year's students and past and future students.

The interests of learners are central to Ofqual's mandate. For us, that means fairness, and qualifications that stand the test of time, that employers, colleges and universities can trust.