

Consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021

Your data and rights

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Consultation questions

Q1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 2021 exams should not include more optional questions than usual?
Disagree

Q2. Do you have any comments on the use of optional exam questions in the 2021 exams?
<p>We would wholeheartedly welcome the dramatic expansion of optional exam questions in the 2021 exams, in all subjects and at all levels, particularly if our other proposals for a fairer exam process (such as retaining centre-assessed grades for at least half the value of the qualification, discussed below) are not implemented. As one SFCA member principal puts it, 'The broader the range of content that is available to be examined, the stronger the possibility that all candidates will be able to complete the paper. This will mitigate against teaching time lost due to the impact of the pandemic.' Optionality is a common-sense response, and expands the range of ways in which students can evidence their learning, rather than narrowing it as other proposals (such as shortening exams) do.</p> <p>Some students have been able to continue 'as normal' since lockdown began in March, covering as much material as they would have if physically present in school or college. Many of these students attend sixth</p>

form colleges, who have the scale and IT infrastructure to teach effectively online; some of our members report over 90% attendance at their online classes. However, most schools do not have the same advantage, and so these students are very much in the minority; the Sutton Trust's survey research (<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>) finds that only 23% of students at the start of lockdown were taking part in online lessons. This fell further for working class pupils to 16%, with inequalities also found in access to online learning platforms, quality of online work, and work completion rates. The EEF's rapid evidence assessment ([https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_\(2020\)_-_Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/EEF_(2020)_-_Impact_of_School_Closures_on_the_Attainment_Gap.pdf)), based on previous 'summer slide' research, gives us powerful reason to think that this loss of learning will have an enduring adverse effect in particular on disadvantaged students, who are likelier to be BAME, and those with SEND. Even those students lucky enough to receive a full online timetable during lockdown will not be unscathed. Research evidence on distance learning, which usually evaluates classes and courses specifically designed for online delivery, is mixed; it is therefore likely that curricula designed to be delivered in-person and hastily adapted by teachers and leaders with limited experience of distance learning is inferior to in-person classroom interaction. We also know from our own membership that, due to privacy concerns, a large proportion of schools and colleges have not allowed students to interact with teachers on camera during lockdown, a key element of successful online learning approaches. A significant number of students will also have been unable to take advantage of all of the programming made available by their college or school as a result of financial pressures or caring responsibilities created by Covid-19. Again, these students are likelier to be those who are disadvantaged, creating inequalities not just between providers but within them.

Any intervention in assessment practice creates new room for inequalities to emerge, even if it successfully counteracts existing inequalities. Expansion of optionality must be accompanied by very clear communication to centres and students, both well before and during exams, about the rules on optional questions, and by excellent work on the part of awarding organisations to ensure that each question is as close to the same level as possible, to ensure comparability between marks awarded to answers to different questions. There are statistical moderation processes which can help with this latter issue, such as running an analysis of differential item functioning, wherein candidates who score similarly overall receive very different marks from one another on given questions. If differential item functioning is detected despite examiners' best efforts to set optional questions of comparable difficulty, it is possible to adjust marks to compensate.

Another key element to consider in designing any examination is construct validity – the extent to which the test measures what it is intended to measure. There will never be a one-to-one match, but tests can come closer (for instance by sampling a broader range of content at the required level) or fall further away (for instance by sampling only one domain of the content at a purely surface level, where the qualification is intended to evidence analytical proficiency). A level exams are intended to measure the extent to which students have mastered the A level syllabus as set out by the DfE and by exam boards; a good result is supposed to indicate that a student has engaged deeply in a range of important key topics in the relevant discipline and is ready to begin degree-level study in the discipline, should they choose to do so. Consider what assessment as usual in 2021 would be measuring: learning and understanding, to be sure, but also the extent to which students' parents were available, willing, and able to tutor them at home during lockdown, their access to technology, and the amount of the curriculum their teacher was able to cover during the time available to her. In short, while assessment results are always correlated with socioeconomic factors, assessment as usual in 2021 would in large part directly measure those factors. This dramatically weakens the construct validity of the exams, as well as limiting the chances of the young people affected. On the other hand, the greater use of optional questions in 2021 to allow students to demonstrate a high level of learning and understanding without demonstrating it across all content areas also has a negative effect on construct validity, if the topics covered on a given A level syllabus are representative of the most important elements of a given discipline. The extent to which this is the case likely varies by subject; to be crude, missing out the Russian revolution in a history A level is less deleterious than missing out advanced trigonometry in a maths A level. Alongside this negative effect on construct validity in some subjects, however, comes no systematic disadvantage for students whose education has been particularly impacted by Covid-19 through no fault of their own. Faced with this choice, optional questions are clearly preferable to assessment as usual.

The possibility that students might receive a strong A level without having adequately shown their understanding of all areas of the syllabus is a frightening one to policymakers and educators alike, and rightly so. In normal times, we would expect students and teachers to have covered the entire syllabus in sufficient detail to allow for examination on every area. However, these are not normal times. The use of centre-assessed grades in 2020, which we fully support, has also meant that students who have missed at least a sixth of their total 16-18 study programme will advance to higher education or employment, potentially without even a familiarity with the syllabus areas they were due to tackle in April and May this

year. This is a real sacrifice, but it is one the Government has rightly decided to make in order to ensure that this year's students are not unfairly penalised for an interruption to their studies through no fault of their own. It would be unforgivable not to make a degree of the same sacrifice for the students of 2021, who have missed significantly more teaching time (as they were, largely, not due to sit exams in June 2020) and may well miss more next year. The greater use of optional questions, even in subjects where they are not usually used at all, is one small way to redress the imbalance.

Finally, it would be remiss to reply to a consultation on arrangements for summer 2021 in response to Covid-19 without acknowledging the inherent uncertainty in planning for events next week, still less next year. Given the significant likelihood that we will see additional waves of the virus, perhaps in the winter, it is likelier than not that Ofqual's arrangements will have to be revisited again before the summer. Announcing significant optionality now, rather than being forced to it in early 2021, would allow for much stronger planning on the part of the awarding organisations and centres, and provide teachers with the breathing room to teach the parts of the curriculum they have time to cover in depth, rather than rushing to teach the entire syllabus on a surface level – which is likely to yield neither strong exam results nor, in the long run, real knowledge. We must not let our desire to return to 'normal' blind us to the compelling evidence that 2020/21 will not, and cannot, be normal for students given the amount of learning lost, particularly by the most disadvantaged.

Q3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the number of exams taken for each subject in 2021 should be the same as usual?

Agree

Q4. Do you have any comments on the number of exams taken for each subject in 2021?

Our members largely agree that adaptations to the content of assessment, in terms of greater optionality, are far more desirable than changes to the number of exams taken or their length. Different providers teach syllabi in different orders, and so it would not be practical to cut the number of exams where, as is usually the case, different papers assess different areas of the syllabus.

Q5. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the exams taken in 2021 should not be longer than usual?

Agree

Q6. Do you have any comments on the length of exams in 2021?

As with the question above on the number of exams, our members are in favour of expanding the range of questions available to students rather than limiting them. Shorter exams would place greater weight on each individual mark gained or lost and each specific question answered – the opposite of what is required when the issue is a lack of time to cover the syllabus in sufficient depth. Further, qualifications based on exams which sample relatively smaller parts of the syllabus will also be of a lower value, if not in public perception then in reality; they tell us less about a student's learning than a qualification based on a broader content sample.

Q7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the GCSE timetable should start after half term in 2021 if results can still be released on 26 August 2021?

Agree

Q8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the GCSE timetable should start after half term in 2021 even if this necessitates a delay in the release of results?

Agree

Q9. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of delaying the start of GCSE exams in 2021?

While our members generally do not teach significant GCSE cohorts, our reasoning on A level exams (below) applies equally to GCSEs and so we feel that the start of exams should be delayed to allow for additional teaching time.

Q10. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the A level and AS timetable should start after half term in 2021 if results can still be released on 19 August 2021?

Agree

Q11. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the A level and AS timetable should start after half term in 2021 even if this necessitates a delay in the release of results?

Agree

Q12. What would be the advantages and disadvantages of delaying the start of A level and AS exams in 2021?

While the delay proposed would add only about two weeks of teaching time to the term in the average college, this is a helpful suggestion. Any additional teaching time, particularly if greater optionality is not adopted, is very welcome to allow teachers to compensate for missed learning. From an assessment fairness standpoint, we would therefore urge Ofqual to delay the start of exams in 2021. Some members, however, are concerned about the potential impact on the timeline for enrolment and induction for new students in college in September 2021. Additionally, a shorter timeline for awarding bodies to mark exams and award grades raises the spectre of greater scope for mistakes.

Which subjects are you interested in?

Please select which subjects you are interested in
Art and design
Biology
Chemistry
Dance
Drama / drama and theatre
English language
English language and literature
Geography
History
Mathematics
Physical education
Physics

Art and Design

Q21. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE art and design in 2021?
Neither agree nor disagree

Q23. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level art and design in 2021?
Strongly agree

Q24. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level art and design in 2021?
We welcome the idea of a 100% portfolio focus for A level art, which will help mitigate for time lost and restrictions on access to specialist resources. Photographic moderation is viable, provided the exam board give sufficient time to document work selected for sample, as practical pieces will need to be more professionally photographed for assessment, particularly any tactile or textural aspects.

Biology

Q31. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE biology in 2021?
Neither agree nor disagree

Q33. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS biology in 2021?

Agree

Q35. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level biology in 2021?

Agree

Q36. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level biology in 2021?

These proposals are sound. However, we would go further; under the GCSE proposals, Ofqual would 'permit observation of demonstrations / simulations to cover required apparatus and techniques.' This is not mentioned under the A level proposals, and it should be; our members feel future social distancing and potential lockdowns will make this necessary.

Chemistry

Q41. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE chemistry in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q43. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS chemistry in 2021?

Agree

Q45. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level chemistry in 2021?

Agree

Q46. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level chemistry in 2021?

These proposals are sound. However, we would go further; under the GCSE proposals, Ofqual would 'permit observation of demonstrations / simulations to cover required apparatus and techniques.' This is not mentioned under the A level proposals, and it should be; our members feel future social distancing and potential lockdowns will make this necessary.

Dance

Q65. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE dance in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q67. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS dance in 2021?

Agree

Q69. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level dance in 2021?

Agree

Q70. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level dance in 2021?

We support the proposed changes. However, we would also like to see the wider use of optional questions in the examination component and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below.

Drama / drama and theatre

Q77. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE drama in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q79. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS drama and theatre in 2021?

Agree

Q81. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level drama and theatre in 2021?

Agree

Q82. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level drama and theatre in 2021?

Whilst we fully support Ofqual's suggestion that the length of the piece and size of the group be reassessed, this will not fully compensate for the fact that groups now will have re-structure and explore/restart the work with a focus on pieces with no contact, which may change the intention of the piece. There will not be a real reduction in workload for the learners, as the time constraints will not make any practical difference to the preparation time required.

We would welcome the reduction of texts to cover but it is unclear how this will be implemented, making it difficult to plan; the sooner the new arrangements are confirmed, the better.

It is good that the live theatre review can now be of a recorded piece, but this may mean an additional cost for tickets, as while companies have been streaming work this has only been available for limited periods of time on streaming platforms.

The quality of equipment needed for exam-ready recording and streaming of shows in a theatre space would have a cost and logistic implication for some providers, potentially disadvantaging their students.

English language

Q93. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE English language in 2021?

Agree

Q94. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE English language in 2021?

We support the proposed changes. However, we would also like to see the wider use of optional questions in the examination component and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below. The proposed changes as they relate to the spoken language component will, in practice, save most classes very little teaching time.

Q95. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS English language in 2021?

Disagree

Q97. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level English language in 2021?

Disagree

Q98. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level English language in 2021?

We would also like to see the wider use of optional questions in the examination component and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below.

In A level English language, the language investigation NEA is always completed in the second year. Removing this to allow for more teaching time, if this is communicated early enough, would be helpful. The same skills are also examined, so removing the NEA component would not reduce student knowledge.

English language and literature

Q105. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS English language and literature in 2021?

Disagree

Q107. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level English language and literature in 2021?

Disagree

Q108. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level English language and literature in 2021?

We would like to see the wider use of optional questions in the examination component and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below.

Geography

Q121. To what extent do you agree or disagree that students taking GCSE geography exams in 2021 should not be required to undertake or be assessed on fieldwork?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q123. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS geography in 2021?

Disagree

Q125. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level geography in 2021?

Disagree

Q126. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level geography in 2021?

We recommend that fieldwork is scrapped for 2020/21. This requires survey and investigation, and transportation to study locations. It is not going to be easy to organise large groups of students visiting locations to survey if social distancing with regards to the general public is to be maintained.

History

Q133. To what extent do you agree or disagree that centres should have a choice of topics on which their students will answer questions for GCSE history exams in 2021?

Agree

Q134. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE history exams in 2021 as set out above?

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Q136. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS history in 2021?

Disagree

Q138. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level history in 2021?

Disagree

Q139. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level history in 2021?

Given the role of non-examined assessment in history A level, removing this would be one way to significantly increase teaching time during the school year. We would also like to see the wider use of optional questions in the examination component and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below.

Maths

Q148. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE maths in 2021?

Disagree

Q150. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level maths in 2021?

Disagree

Q151. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level maths in 2021?

We would like to see the wider use of optional questions and the use of centre-assessed grades, as discussed above and below. Optional questions could be particularly well used in the applied modules (mechanics and statistics), where coverage of all content is less important than in the core topics, which are essential for further study.

Physical education

Q176. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE physical education in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q178. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE physical education (short course) in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q180. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level physical education in 2021?

Agree

Q181. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for AS and A level physical education in 2021?

PE students who specialise in summer sports such as athletics, cricket, and potentially swimming will not necessarily be able to obtain footage of their activities before NEA is due to be submitted, as they would usually be doing this in summer 2020, but now do not have access to relevant facilities. The use of centre-assessed grades for the NEA component would be sensible here.

Physics

Q182. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for GCSE physics in 2021?

Neither agree nor disagree

Q184. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for AS physics in 2021?

Agree

Q186. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for A level physics in 2021?

Agree

Q187. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for A level physics in 2021?

These proposals are sound. However, we would go further; under the GCSE proposals, Ofqual would 'permit observation of demonstrations / simulations to cover required apparatus and techniques.' This is not mentioned under the A level proposals, and it should be; our members feel future social distancing and potential lockdowns will make this necessary.

Impact assessments

Q208. Are there other potential equality impacts that we have not explored? What are they?

The achievement gap will widen in 2020 and 2021 for BAME students and those from working class backgrounds. It is now impossible to avoid this, based on all of the evidence we have on the impact of previous gaps in teaching and the nature of home learning during the lockdown in the UK. Given this, any changes to assessment in 2021 and beyond should be given a full published equalities impact assessment to explore their effects on students from disadvantaged groups. This applies both to the changes proposed in this consultation, and to those we have proposed in response such as greater optionality and the use of centre-assessed grades. This equalities impact assessment should not just consider the direct role of ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic background, and disability, etc., but also the interrelationship between prior attainment and each of these factors. If changes to assessment privilege students with higher prior attainment, those students are also likelier to be affluent, female, and able-bodied, for instance.

Q209. We would welcome your views on how any potential negative impacts on particular groups of students could be mitigated.

It is by no means perfect or devoid of its own biases, as Ofqual's review (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879605/Equality_impact_assessment_literature_review_15_April_2020.pdf) of the literature on teacher assessment in 2020 showed, but we propose that the potentially deleterious effects of 'assessment as normal' on disadvantaged groups would be best mitigated either by including significant optionality in all exams, or by using centre-assessed grades alongside exam assessment. This could be by calculating average grades based half on a student's CAG and half on their examinations, or by using the CAG as a 'safety net', where students cannot go more than perhaps a single grade below their CAG. Analysis of 2020 CAGs should allow for a clearer understanding of how optimistic or pessimistic they are relative to usual exam assessment, which should inform this approach.

Q210. Are there additional activities associated with changing the exam and assessment arrangements for students taking the qualifications in summer 2021 that we have not identified above? What are they?

As discussed in response to question 15, we propose the use of CAGs in 2021 to make up at least part of a student's grade.

Feedback

We want to write clearly and effectively, putting the reader first. How easy to read did you find this consultation? (Please rate from 1 very hard to read to 5 very easy to read)

	1	2	3	4	5	
Very hard to read				X		Very easy to read

Your details

Which nation or country are you based in?

England

Q213. How did you find out about this consultation?

Ofqual's website

Is this the official response from your organisation or your own, personal response?

This is the official response from my organisation

Your details (official response)

Q215. Which of these options best describes your organisation?

Other representative or interest group

Your details (representative group)

Type of representative or interest group

School, college or teacher representative group

Confidentiality

Do you wish any part of your response to remain confidential?
No