

Up-to-speed on: Ofqual's proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A-levels in 2021

The coronavirus pandemic has caused widespread disruption to planned teaching time resulting in the cancellation of exams for 2019/2020. Provisions are being organised to mitigate similar problems from occurring in the next academic year.

Ofqual is seeking views on its proposals to change the assessment and requirements for 2020/2021 in some subjects to:

- Free up teaching time and, in some instances, reduce what needs to be taught.
- Take account of public health restrictions relating to coronavirus that might be in place during the next academic year.



Key points

The key points are as follows:

- Adaptations to exams and assessments would be made to help to free up teaching time and address potential problems created by public health restrictions
- Changes would be made to the sampling of subject content in GCSE history, ancient history and geography
- The exam timetable would change to allow for more teaching time
- The length of exams would not change

Read on to learn more information about each key point.



Adaptations to exams and assessments that could free up teaching

By adapting exams and assessments to free up teaching, Ofqual hopes to ensure all content is taught to pupils and that some content that was covered before closure can be revisited.

One of the steps Ofqual has already taken is to give schools and colleges the choice of varying the requirement for GCSE computer science to be taught for 20 timetabled hours; although, this requirement is set to be removed after the 2020/2021 academic year.

Ofqual is also proposing other changes including, but not limited to, the following:

- Changing the spoken language assessment requirement in GCSE English Language so that teachers are not required to record a sample of pupils taking this assessment.
- Assessing GCSE, AS and A-level art and design groups on their portfolios only, as opposed to the current 60% portfolio and 40% externally.
- Relaxing the requirement for pupils to undertake practical science work and allowing them to observe experiments instead, e.g. by watching the teacher's demonstration.

The full list of proposed changes for GCSEs can be found on page 16 of the guidance (which is available [here](#)). The proposals affecting AS and A-levels begin on page 26.



Adaptations to exams and assessments to address problems that could be created by any public health restrictions

It is not yet clear whether public health safeguards, like social distancing measures, will need to be reintroduced or even strengthened for the next academic year; however, to ensure safety, Ofqual has identified subjects where challenges could be faced if social distancing measures remain in place.

Examples of the alternative arrangements include:

- Allowing GCSE drama classes to watch a streamed or recorded performance, as opposed to seeing a live performance in a theatre.
- Relaxing the requirements for A-level dance and GCSE drama performances to be conducted in groups to allow class members to perform solo.



Sampling of subject content

The Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, has asked Ofqual to look at options for the pragmatic use of content sampling.

GCSE English language, English literature, maths and the sciences would not be changed, as Ofqual and the DfE have agreed that these core subjects are fundamental to pupils' ability to progress to further study. Likewise, Ofqual has not proposed any changes to the way content is sampled for AS and A-level subjects.

In many other GCSE subjects that are taken by a large number of pupils, Ofqual has proposed changes which will free up teaching time without making any changes to the way subject content is sampled. The exams regulator has not, however, been able to identify ways of reducing the impact of lost teaching time on pupils taking GCSE history, ancient history and geography, meaning some changes the way content is sampled in these subjects are needed.

For GCSE history and ancient history, Ofqual is proposing to introduce a choice of topics on which pupils would be required to answer questions in their exams – with one topic remaining mandatory. For GCSE geography, Ofqual has proposed that the content relating to fieldwork should not be assessed in 2021. This approach gives schools and colleges some choice over the content they teach – helping teachers and pupils to cover the content in appropriate depth.

For more information on how GCSE history and ancient history will be assessed under the proposals, head to annex C on page 53 of the consultation.



Changes to the exam timetable

Ofqual has been asked by the Education Secretary to consider whether the exam timetable could be delayed allowing for more teaching time. In reaction to this, exam boards have been asked to consider whether GCSEs could start on 7 June 2021 (after half-term) and if it would still be feasible for GCSE results to be issued on the planned date of 26 August 2021.

Making these amendments to the exam timetable would result in the exam period being extended into July, so Ofqual would need to change its rules to allow for the exam timetable to be revised.



Changing the length of exams

The government has previously asked Ofqual to consider the increased use of optional questions. Under this approach, pupils would not have advance notice of which units would be covered in the relevant exams. Teachers may decide to teach a portion of the subject content to free up teaching time, with the expectation that pupils would still be able to answer sufficient exam questions, or pupils themselves may decide to focus their revision only on certain aspects of content.

Ofqual has identified, however, that this approach may leave pupils unable to answer some questions, leading them to make decisions in exams which could lose them marks. It has also been noted that including more optional questions would make exam papers longer than usual, making it harder for some pupils to complete the papers in the allocated time, e.g. those who are slower at reading.

As a result, Ofqual is not proposing that exams include more optional questions, except in GCSE history and ancient history where pupils would know in advance which units would be optional.



How to have your say

The consultation runs until 11:45pm on Thursday 16 July 2020. To have your say on the proposals and read the full consultation, click [here](#).

Bibliography

Ofqual (2020) 'Consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021'