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Coronavirus: GCSEs, A Levels and equivalents in 2022



Summary

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Summary

This briefing provides background on school and college exams and assessments in summer 2022. It covers adaptations to assessments, what happens in cases of absence, grading, and appeals. It also provides historical background on qualifications and awarding in 2020 and 2021, when exams were cancelled owing to coronavirus.

Summer GCSE, AS and A Level exams took place in 2022

In 2020 and 2021, the main summer series of exams for GCSEs, AS and A Levels (and their equivalents in Scotland) were cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic. Instead, students received grades based on teacher or lecturer assessment. Summer 2022 sees the return of a full exam series in all four UK nations.

2022 grades will be more generous than pre-pandemic ones, but ‘grade inflation’ is being rolled back

In 2020 and 2021 grades awarded via teacher and lecturer assessment were significantly higher, overall, than they had been in 2019.

For England, regulator Ofqual has announced that [grading in 2022 will again be more generous than it was pre-pandemic](#), but that grades are expected to fall at a mid-point between those in 2019 and 2021. In future, the plan is for grades to revert to a more normal distribution. As such, 2022 has been described as a ‘transition year’.

There are other changes to exams

In England, there are more changes to exams in 2022, including advance information on exam topics, greater choice of topics in some subjects, and formula and equation sheets for some subjects with a maths component.

Similar changes to grade boundaries and the form and content of exams apply across the UK.

How fair are exams in 2022, given lost face-to-face learning?

Students in exam years 11 (GCSE) and 13 (A level) have missed significant periods of face-to-face learning, and some remain concerned that the adaptations and allowances don't go far enough to compensate.

GCSE, A Level, Higher/ Advanced Higher grades (in Scotland), and equivalent qualifications, are high stakes in that they serve as a passport to further and higher education, training and employment.

Some education organisations are concerned about the potential backlash if 2022 grades are markedly less generous than in 2020 and 2021.¹

¹ See eg, "[Students facing 'significant dial-down' of GCSE and A-level grades, sparking backlash fears](#)", in INews [online], 3 December 2021

1 GCSE, AS, A Level, and Scottish equivalents: 2022

1.1 England

Exams went ahead, with some adaptations

GCSEs, AS, A Level and equivalent assessments and exams went ahead in England in summer 2022. School-level performance (league) tables are also being re-introduced for the end of the GCSE and A Level phases – key stages 4 and 5 - in 2022. This school-level information was not published during either 2020 or 2021.²

For GCSEs, AS, and A Levels, changes in summer 2022 included:

- Some choice of topic or content in GCSE English literature, ancient history, history, and geography.
- Demonstrations of practical work in:
 - sciences and some related subjects at GCSE.
 - biology, chemistry, physics and geology at AS Level.
 - environmental science at both AS and A Level.

This was an alternative to students doing practical work themselves if necessary. Demonstrations could be remote or in the form of videos.

- Modifications to the practical endorsement component of A Level chemistry, physics, biology, and geology.
- Art and design GCSE, AS and A Level are being assessed solely based on students' portfolios of work, rather than an exam board-set task completed under timed, supervised conditions.
- The provision of advance information on the focus of the content of exams, in most subjects.

² Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): school and college accountability 2021/22](#), 19 July 2021

- Formula sheets in GCSE maths, GCSE combined science, and GCSE physics exams.

Some subjects such as physical education and geography include non-examination assessment – for example, practicals or performance of skills, or fieldwork elements. There were adaptations to the usual requirements, as set out in another Ofqual document:

- Ofqual, [Consultation outcome: Arrangements for non-exam assessment for qualifications in 2022](#), 16 June 2021.

What happened if students had coronavirus symptoms on exam day?

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) published guidance for schools, colleges, and other exam centres on what to do where students' exam performance or participation was affected by illness, including coronavirus, injury, or other adverse circumstances at the time of their exams:

- JCQ, [A guide to the special consideration process 2021/22 – general and vocational qualifications](#), 24 June 2022 [link to PDF, 352KB]. Annex 1 provided supplementary guidance on pupils in England experiencing coronavirus symptoms, or with a positive test result.

Exams were spaced to allow 10 days between papers for the same specification, where possible, so that pupils who missed one exam because of temporary illness stood a better chance of being able to sit at least one paper.

How will 2022 grades compare to those awarded in 2020 and 2021?

Overall, grades awarded by centre/ teacher assessment in 2020 and 2021 were considerably higher than in 2019. The plan for 2022 is that grading will be at a mid-point between 2019 and 2021, so the 'grade inflation' washout will begin.

When will grades be announced in England?

- AS and A Level results will be announced on Thursday 18 August 2022
- GCSE results will be released a week later, on Thursday 25 August

Appealing GCSE, AS or A level results from summer 2022 in England

There is [Ofqual guidance on the appeals process for Summer 2022](#). Normally, an appeal will need to be made by the student's school, college, or provider, rather than by the individual themselves.

1.2

Vocational, technical and other qualifications and assessments in 2022

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) are often taken as an alternative to, or alongside, GCSEs and A Levels. The VTQ landscape is complex; there are many different types of qualification, with different assessment arrangements.

As for GCSEs and A Levels, the regulator for England, Ofqual, allowed awarding bodies to make adaptations to qualifications in 2022, including providing advance information on the content of assessments, and to the form of assessments, where appropriate.

Further background on the regulatory arrangements for VTQs in the 2021-22 academic year can be found in:

- Ofqual, [Arrangements for the assessment and awarding of vocational, technical and other general qualifications: 2021 to 2022](#), 6 August 2021

1.3

Reaction to exam arrangements for summer 2022

Some commentators in the education sector have expressed concerns about the potential backlash if 2022 grades are markedly less generous than in 2020 and 2021.³

Another issue often raised has been the timing of announcements on the plans for 2022, with some complaining that schools, pupils and parents were left with insufficient certainty about what would happen.

Responding to the Government's [announcement of plans for summer 2022](#) in July 2021,⁴ then-Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Kate Green, criticised the fact that the consultation on arrangements for 2022 had not been launched earlier, and asked why greater topic choice would only be available in some GCSE subjects. She welcomed that the Government acknowledged the need for contingency measures.⁵

Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon, asked about lost learning and the impact on disadvantaged students in particular, "many of whom", he said, had "not yet benefited from the catch-up programme". He continued:

³ See eg, "[Students facing 'significant dial-down' of GCSE and A-level grades, sparking backlash fears](#)", in INews [online], 3 December 2021

⁴ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1173](#)

⁵ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1175-1176](#)

My worry about the approach the Minister set out is that requiring exam boards to provide advance information about exam content and support means that the Government are in essence reducing a 100 metre race to a 50 metre race while keeping all the pupils at the same starting point whatever their disadvantage. The pupils who have experienced the most lost learning will still be the most disadvantaged compared with those who were in school more at the time. Could he at least consider ensuring a level playing field and taking a more nuanced data-driven approach that takes into account the fact that millions of children have experienced lost learning? That could be done by increasing the time allowed to do the exams or adjusting the grade weighting to reflect the number of days that pupils have lost.⁶

The National Education Union (NEU) said the Government had acted with “grim predictability” by launching a short consultation “in the dead of summer”. Joint General Secretary, Kevin Courtney, argued that schools, colleges and pupils needed certainty by 1 September 2021, at the latest, but the consultation was “unlikely to provide definitive answers ahead of the new term starting in September. At best it will be a partial picture of arrangements.”⁷

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said consultation was necessary but came too late. On the specific proposals, it said that “giving students what is effectively a broad revision list just a few weeks before exams begin will not ensure fairness for all students [...]”.⁸

August 2022 Sutton Trust report

A Sutton Trust briefing, [A Levels and university access 2022](#) reports findings from two surveys: one of around 4,100 teachers in England, and one of around 400 university applicants across Great Britain.

The briefing estimates:

- Almost half of teachers (45%) involved with exams in 2022 did not think that the mitigations were adequate to address the pandemic disruption. A higher proportion (46%) of teachers working in state-funded schools thought this, compared to teachers working in independent fee-paying schools (38%).
- 57% of teachers agreed with Ofqual’s approach to grade boundaries in 2022, but 29% felt the approach was too strict.
- Most A Level students (76%) applying to university felt that advance information on exam topics was helpful, but only 52% thought the

⁶ [HC Deb 22 July 2021, Vol. 699, Col. 1178](#)

⁷ National Education Union press notice, [‘Qualifications in 2022’](#), 12 July 2021

⁸ National Association of Head Teachers press notice, [‘Government is already ‘way behind the curve’ with arrangements for exams in 2022, says NAHT’](#), 12 July 2021

changes to exams had fairly taken into account the impact of the pandemic.

- 72% of teachers thought the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers at their school would widen in 2022.
- 60% of A Level university applicants were concerned about getting a place at their first choice university; this was 13 percentage points higher than in 2021.⁹

1.4

Wales

GCSE, AS and A Level exams went ahead in Wales in summer 2022, with adaptations. Exam regulator for Wales, Qualifications Wales, said in a statement:

[Welsh exam board] WJEC has recently consulted on the proposed adaptations with teachers, learners and parents. This week WJEC will publish the outcome of the consultation and the information will be available for schools and colleges.

Unless there is significant impact by the pandemic, we are planning that approved GCSE, AS and A level qualifications will be assessed via exams and non-examination assessments as normal, but reflecting the adaptations, in summer 2022. However, alternative arrangements will be put in place in case there is significant impact on teaching and learning as a consequence of the pandemic.¹⁰

The following web article provides a summary of the main adaptations to GCSEs, AS, A levels and vocational qualifications in Wales:

- Qualifications Wales, [Changes or adaptations to assessments 2021/22](#), undated

More detailed guidance can be found in examination board WJEC's publications:

- WJEC/CBAC, [Learner guide: GCSE adaptations 2022](#), [link to PDF, 265KB]
- WJEC/CBAC, [Adaptations to WJEC Vocational and Other General Qualifications 2021/22](#), February 2022 [link to PDF, 2.3MB]

⁹ Sutton Trust, [A Levels and university access 2022](#), 4 August 2022, ps 1-2. Results from both surveys were weighted.

¹⁰ Qualifications Wales, [Statement about assessment arrangements for Summer 2022](#), undated

- WJEC/CBAC, [Learner guide: AS/ A Level adaptations 2022](#), April 2022 [link to PDF, 335KB]

[Appendix two to the JCQ guidance on special consideration](#) [link to PDF, 352KB] provides advice for exam centres in Wales, in cases where students have been affected by circumstances outside their control, including illness, at the time of their assessment.

1.5

Scotland

Secondary students in Scotland generally take National 5s, Highers and Advanced Highers, rather than GCSEs and A Levels as elsewhere in the UK. The exam diet (season) is also held earlier in Scotland – starting in late April and finishing by the beginning of June.

There were a number of modifications to the form and content of assessments in summer 2022, which varied by subject but included, for example, increased choice within the assessment; removal of topics; or altering elements of exams or coursework.

Results day in Scotland is Tuesday 9 August 2022.

Initial results

The Scottish Qualifications Authority published [headline results](#) on 9 August 2022. As they note, the grade boundaries and system of awarding is different in 2022, from the two preceding years which makes year-on-year comparisons problematic – the drop in the proportion of entries graded A to C was expected, owing to the decision to set grade boundaries at an intermediate point between pre-pandemic, and in 2021 – ie, to begin ‘washing out’ grade inflation.

In 2022:

- **78.9% of Highers were graded A to C.** In 2019, the last year in which exams took place as normal pre-pandemic, 74.8% of Highers received these grades. In 2021, when there were no exams and teachers and lecturers graded pupils, and grading was overall more ‘generous’, 87.3% of highers were at grades A to C.
- **80.8% of National 5s were at grades A to C.** In 2019, the figure was 78.2%, and in 2021, it was 85.8%.¹¹

¹¹ Scottish Qualifications Authority, [“SQA publishes 2022 results”](#), 9 August 2022

A Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) press release provided some initial details on how exam results were translating into higher education places:

Following the return to examinations this year, a record 60.1% of Scottish students gained a place at their firm choice university, up from the pre-pandemic level of 57.5% in 2019. This figure will rise as more confirmation decisions are made over the coming days.

Today has also seen continued success in widening access, with a significant closing of the gender progression gap for young people in Scotland (aged 19 and under). In 2019, 50% more females progressed to higher education than males. Today that has narrowed to 39% (from 47% last year).

Participation of young students from the most disadvantaged areas (SIMD40) is reassuringly up from pre-pandemic levels, with 23.9% of all acceptances from SIMD40 areas compared to 23.4 last year and 22.4% in 2019, reaffirming the continued support to widen access in Scotland.

Other key points from today's release include:

- The overall number of Scottish students accepted is 30,490, up from 28,750 in 2019.
- Of those accepted, 29,630 will be studying in Scotland – an increase of 1,740 on 2019.
- The number of students accepted on to nursing courses is 2,960 – up by 450 compared to 2019.¹²

Appeals in Scotland

Where a student sat an exam, but the grade awarded is below the estimated grade submitted to the exam board, they may be able to appeal – or their school or college may be able to do so on their behalf. Further information can be found on [the appeals section of the SQA website](#).

The SQA provides the following information about deadlines for appealing:

Priority appeals are available for learners who have a conditional offer for a college or university place or for a training or employment offer and must be submitted to SQA by Friday 19 August. All other appeals must be submitted by Friday 2 September.¹³

¹² Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), "[Record proportion of Scottish students accepted at their first-choice university](#)", 9 August 2022

¹³ Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) news story, "[SQA outlines support to young people ahead of results day](#)", 2 August 2022

1.6

Northern Ireland

GCSEs, AS and A Level exams went ahead in summer 2022. Some changes were made to the form and content of qualifications offered by Northern Ireland exam board, CCEA. A CCEA [news story](#) provided further details:

Today, Monday 17 May 2021, the [then] Education Minister, Peter Weir MLA, made [a statement](#) to the Northern Assembly, regarding awarding and assessment arrangements for Summer 2022.

Due to the disruption faced by COVID-19, the Education Minister announced that “significantly fewer examinations” would be sat in 2022 and there would be “significant reductions in assessment” across CCEA’s suite of GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications.

Further key points highlighted by the Education Minister included:

- One assessment will be omitted from the vast majority of GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications in 2022.
- Students’ overall grade will be determined by their performance in the unit or units they sit.
- A student who wishes to take all examinations can do so. There is no obligation to do so. Any student who sits all units will be awarded the higher grade from either all units or the mandatory units only.
- Unit omissions will also be applied across CCEA Entry Level, Occupational Studies and Vocationally Related qualifications.

Regarding the contribution of 2021 AS grades to 2022 A2 grades, the Education Minister confirmed that CCEA A Level awards in 2022 will be made based on students’ performance in their A2 examinations only.¹⁴

The Department of Education has published [a FAQs document](#) relating to CCEA qualifications in 2021-22.

¹⁴ CCEA news story, [‘Education Minister Makes Announcement on Summer 2022 Assessment’](#) 17 May 2021

2 Awarding in 2021: England

2.1 Cancellation of exams in summer 2021

Students who were due to sit public exams in summer 2021 – for example, GCSEs and A Levels - missed face-to-face teaching for most of the summer 2020 term, and also much of the spring term 2021. Some may also have been required to self-isolate during autumn term 2020.

In England, the original intention had been to go ahead with exams in summer 2021, in a modified form. However, on 4 January 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that GCSE, AS and A Level exams in the summer would be cancelled, and replaced by a teacher-assessed grades (TAGs). The approach to awarding Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) depended on the nature of the qualification.

More information on the process for awarding results in summer 2020, and on outcomes by student and school and college characteristics can be found in [section four](#) of this briefing paper.

Sector reaction

Membership organisation, the Association of Colleges (AoC) said that the proposals for 2021 were “the best solution to a difficult situation”, but cautioned that bringing forward GCSE results day would create “extremely high workloads” for college staff. It also cautioned about the potential for bias in the proposed approach.¹⁵

Think tank, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) said that the Government had been right to opt for teacher assessment, but that “significant risks” remained. These included the potential for inconsistencies between pupil groups and institutions, for “extremely high” grade inflation, or for large numbers of student appeals.¹⁶

Social mobility charity, the Sutton Trust, also said the Government was right to opt for teacher assessment, describing it as the “most pragmatic option, with enough flexibility to ensure students are only judged on what they have covered in a highly disrupted year.” However, it said that moderation would

¹⁵ Association of Colleges, ‘[Plans for awarding grades in 2021 set out by government - AoC responds](#)’, 24 February 2021

¹⁶ Education Policy Institute, ‘[Education Policy Institute responds to the government’s plans for 2021 grades](#)’, 25 February 2021

be “crucial” to ensuring comparability of results between more affluent and lower-income schools.¹⁷

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) said that the plans appeared to “chart a path which avoids the awful chaos of last year”, but that it was concerned about the decision to issue GCSE results in the same week as A Level results.¹⁸

Government consultations on arrangements for 2021

Exams regulator for England, Ofqual, and the Department for Education, jointly carried out several consultations on awarding [GCSEs, AS and A Levels](#) and [vocational and technical qualifications](#) (VTQs) in 2021.¹⁹ The final approach was set out in two documents:

- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on how GCSE, AS and A Level grades will be determined in summer 2021](#), 25 February 2021.
- Ofqual/ DfE, [Decisions on alternative arrangements for the award of VTQ and other general qualifications in 2021](#), 25 February 2021.

A different appeals system in 2021

In 2021, for GCSEs, AS and A Levels and qualifications commonly taken as alternatives to these, there was a review and appeals process which differed substantially from the normal process.

The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) represents exam boards across the UK. It [published guidance](#) [link to PDF, 372KB] on the process in 2021.

The exams regulator for England, Ofqual, also [published statutory guidance](#) on reviews and appeals in 2021.

In respect of GCSEs, AS and A Levels, and some other relevant qualifications, there were two main stages:

- The first stage was **review by the exam centre (i.e., the school, college, or provider)**. Priority reviews were “for students applying to higher education who did not attain their firm choice, ie, the offer they accepted as their first choice, and wish to appeal an A level or other Level 3 qualification result”.²⁰

¹⁷ Sutton Trust, [‘The Sutton Trust responds to the Government’s new assessment proposals’](#), 25 February 2021

¹⁸ National Association of Head Teachers, [‘The government owes GCSE and A Level students a robust system of awarding grades, says NAHT’](#), 25 February 2021

¹⁹ [Letter from Gavin Williamson to Simon Lebus](#), 13 January 2021

²⁰ Joint Council for Qualifications, [A guide to appeals processes](#), Summer 2021 series, 10 June 2021, p20

- The second stage was an **appeal to the awarding body (exam board)**.

A student who remained concerned after following the two stages above may have been able to apply to the [Exam Procedures Review Service \(EPRS\)](#) for a procedural review.

Autumn GCSE, AS and A Level exam series

There was an additional exam series in autumn 2021, for students who received a teacher-assessed grade or who an exam board believed would have entered for the exams in summer 2021, if they had taken place. As normal, any student who was aged at least 16 on 31 August 2021 could take the GCSE English language and maths exams during this period, as well.

- Autumn series AS and A Level exams took place in October 2021.
- Autumn series GCSE exams took place in November 2021.²¹

2.2

Vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs)

How VTQs were awarded in 2021

For those qualifications commonly taken as alternatives to GCSEs or A Levels, for example, BTECs and Cambridge Technicals - teachers and lecturers used a variety of evidence to produce an assessed grade. This included, for example, tasks or assessments already completed. Background information on awarding VTQs in 2021 can be found in Ofqual's [Student guide to awarding summer 2021](#).

²¹ See: Ofqual, [Consultation decisions: Arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level exams in autumn 2021](#), 13 May 2021

3 Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland: awarding in 2021

3.1 Scotland

On 7 October 2020, the Scottish Government announced that National 5 examinations (broadly, GCSE equivalents) would not go ahead in 2021,²² and on 8 December 2020, it confirmed that Higher and Advanced Higher exams would also not take place.

Instead, an Alternative Certification Model was used to award all of these qualifications: that is, one based on internal assessment, supported by quality assurance.²³ The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) [published guidance for schools, colleges and students](#) on changes to National Qualifications in 2021.

3.2 Wales

Exam regulator, Qualifications Wales, [recommended](#) on 29 October 2020 that external assessment should be retained for GCSEs, AS and A Levels in Wales, in 2021, but that exams were only timetabled for A Levels. For GCSE and AS Levels, its view was that grades should be awarded on the basis of coursework and common assessments carried out during the year. For A Levels, its recommendation was that students should sit one exam paper for each subject, supplemented by coursework and set tasks.

An independent panel led by the Open University's Director in Wales, Louise Casella, came to different conclusions in their [interim report](#) [link to PDF, 340KB]. The panel's early recommendations were that no exams should go ahead in 2021, and that grades should be awarded instead "on the basis of robust and moderated assessment undertaken in schools and colleges".²⁴

²² Scottish Government, '[SQA Awards 2021: Deputy First Minister's speech](#)', 7 October 2020

²³ Scottish Government, '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - education sector: Deputy First Minister statement 8 December 2020](#)', 8 December 2020

²⁴ Independent review of the summer 2020 arrangements to award grades, and considerations for summer 2021: [interim report](#), October 2020

On 10 November 2020, Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, [announced](#) that GCSEs, AS and A Levels would be cancelled in summer 2021.²⁵ Instead, there were teacher-managed assessments, including some that were externally set and marked but delivered within a classroom environment.²⁶

3.3

Northern Ireland

On 6 January 2021, the Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced that exams would not go ahead in Northern Ireland in the summer. As for England, the original plan had been for exams to run, but with some adaptations.²⁷

Explaining the decision, he said:

I have previously said that we are preparing for all eventualities and I had asked CCEA to take work forward so that plans are ready to be activated in relation to the 2021 examination series should they be required. I now feel we have reached a point where, while I still believe examinations are the most appropriate and fairest awarding methodology, with a further 6 weeks of remote learning having to be imposed, we cannot continue with exams in the way that was planned.²⁸

On 2 February 2021, Mr Weir provided further details on the arrangements in a [Statement](#), and also confirmed that no algorithm would be used, unlike the original system implemented in 2020.²⁹

²⁵ Welsh Government press release, '[Wales' approach for qualifications in 2021 confirmed by Education Minister Kirsty Williams](#)', 10 November 2020

²⁶ Welsh Government, '[Examination and assessment guidance: 2020 to 2021](#)', updated 22 December 2020

²⁷ See: Department of Education news story, '[Changes to examinations and qualifications announced to support pupil progress](#)', 9 October 2020

²⁸ Peter Weir, [Statement to the Ad-hoc Committee on Coronavirus](#), 6 January 2021

²⁹ Peter Weir, [Statement on Alternative Awarding Arrangements summer 2021](#), 2 February 2021

4 Awarding in 2020

4.1 England

Original model: Centre assessment and statistical adjustment

There were no GCSE or A Level examinations in Summer 2020. Instead, a different process, including statistical standardisation, was initially used to provide most candidates in England with A Level grades.

A level results in England were originally announced on 13 August 2020. Significant concern was raised about the impact of the system used to assign grades (see below), focusing in particular on students from less advantaged schools or colleges who had been awarded lower grades than expected, preventing them from taking up places at their preferred university.

On 17 August, Ofqual issued a [statement](#) withdrawing the previous system, and stating that grades would be awarded on the basis of information teachers had submitted about individual pupils – known as Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs). This would apply to AS and A levels, and also to the GCSE results to be published on 20 August:

There was no easy solution to the problem of awarding exam results when no exams have taken place. Ofqual was asked by the Secretary of State to develop a system for awarding calculated grades, which maintained standards and ensured that grades were awarded broadly in line with previous years. Our goal has always been to protect the trust that the public rightly has in educational qualifications.

But we recognise that while the approach we adopted attempted to achieve these goals we also appreciate that it has also caused real anguish and damaged public confidence. Expecting schools to submit appeals where grades were incorrect placed a burden on teachers when they need to be preparing for the new term and has created uncertainty and anxiety for students. For all of that, we are extremely sorry.

We have therefore decided that students be awarded their centre assessment for this summer - that is, the grade their school or college estimated was the grade they would most likely have achieved in their exam - or the moderated grade, whichever is higher.

The statement further said Ofqual was working with the Department for Education and universities on the way forward.³⁰

Ofqual issued a separate statement on the [grading of vocational and technical qualifications](#) (VTQs), such as BTECs. A different system had been in place for grading these qualifications:

Under the framework for VTQs, each awarding organisation has been responsible for developing its own model for issuing results in line with a set of principles. The framework allows awarding organisations, where necessary, to prioritise the issue of sufficiently valid and reliable results over the maintenance of standards. Ofqual developed and implemented this framework in close collaboration with awarding organisations and the wider sector. Although calculated results have been issued for many VTQs, in only a very few cases has the same kind of statistical standardisation process of Centre Assessment Grades (CAGs) been used – in other words, we think there are few qualifications where the cohort has received entirely algorithmically determined grades.

Where a standardisation model similar to the Ofqual model for GCSEs and A levels had been used, Ofqual asked the relevant organisations to review their approach. As a result, Ofqual believed “a small proportion” of VTQ results would be reissued.³¹

On 19 August, following Ofqual’s announcements, the awarding body Pearson announced that it was [regrading the following BTECs](#): BTEC Level 3 Nationals (2010 QCF and 2016 RQF), BTEC Level 1/2 Tech Awards, BTEC Level 2 Technicals and BTEC Level 1/2 Firsts.

Pearson said this was “to deliver fair outcomes for BTEC students in relation to A Levels and GCSEs and to ensure that no student is disadvantaged,” and that no grades would go down as part of the review.³²

The original awarding process: further detail

Schools and colleges were asked to provide a centre assessment grade (CAG). This is the grade a student would have been most likely to have achieved if they’d sat their exams and completed any non-exam assessment. They were also asked to supply awarding bodies with a list of candidates in rank order, within each grade, for each subject.

Standardisation

Following a [consultation](#), exams regulator for England, Ofqual, also decided that exam boards should standardise grades. This involved the use of:

³⁰ Ofqual, [Statement from Roger Taylor, Chair, Ofqual](#), 17 August 2020

³¹ Ofqual, [Grading of vocational and technical qualifications](#), 17 August 2020

³² Pearson, [Results day support for learners and parents](#), 19 August 2020

a statistical model which will include the expected national outcomes for this year's students, the prior attainment of students at each school and college (at cohort, not individual level), and previous results of the school or college.³³

The consultation set out the aims of standardisation as:

- to provide students with the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020;
- to apply a common standardisation approach, within and across subjects, for as many students as possible;
- to use a method that is transparent and easy to explain, wherever possible, to encourage engagement and build confidence;
- to protect, so far as is possible, all students from being systematically advantaged or disadvantaged, notwithstanding their socio-economic background or whether they have a protected characteristic;
- to be deliverable by exam boards in a consistent and timely way that they can quality assure and can be overseen effectively by Ofqual.³⁴

In response to the consultation, Ofqual confirmed that the standardisation process would:

place more weight on a centre's historical performance in a subject than the submitted centre assessment grades where that will result in students getting the grades that they would most likely have achieved had they been able to complete their assessments in summer 2020.³⁵

Further information on the standardisation process was provided in Ofqual's [interim report on awarding in summer 2020](#).³⁶

2020 grade statistics summary

Nearly all Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) which were changed were adjusted downwards (95% for A Levels and 92% of AS Levels). More A Level CAGs were marked down in FE colleges (46%) and least in independent schools (34%).

The final results showed an increase in top grades at A level and GCSE, particularly in independent and grammar schools. The smallest increases in top grades were in FE colleges:

³³ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020

³⁴ Ofqual consultation, '[Exceptional arrangements for assessment and grading in 2020](#)', 24 April 2020, p7

³⁵ Ofqual news story, '[Ofqual GCSE and A level consultation outcomes and autumn exam series proposals](#)', 22 May 2020

³⁶ Ofqual, '[Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020](#)', 13 August 2020

- In 2020, 87.5% of A Level entries achieved grade C or above compared to 75.5% in 2019.
- In 2020, 75.9% of GCSE entries achieved grade 4 or above³⁷ compared to 67.1% in 2019.

What proportion of Centre Assessed Grades were adjusted?

As noted above, on 13 August the (standardised) A level and AS level results for England were announced.

The chart below shows that in total **39.1%** of A level Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) were adjusted downwards, around **2.2%** were adjusted upward, and **58.7%** of entries were not adjusted.

The pattern for AS Level CAGs was similar, **36.9%** of AS level CAGs were adjusted downwards, around **3.1%** were adjusted upward, and **59.8%** of entries were not adjusted.³⁸

There were 718,276 A level exam **entries** in total, this means that around 280,800 CAGs were adjusted downwards, 15,800 were adjusted upwards and 421,600 were not adjusted.

There were 70,505 AS level exam **entries** in total, this means that around 26,000 CAGs were adjusted downwards, 2,200 were adjusted upwards and 42,200 were not adjusted.³⁹

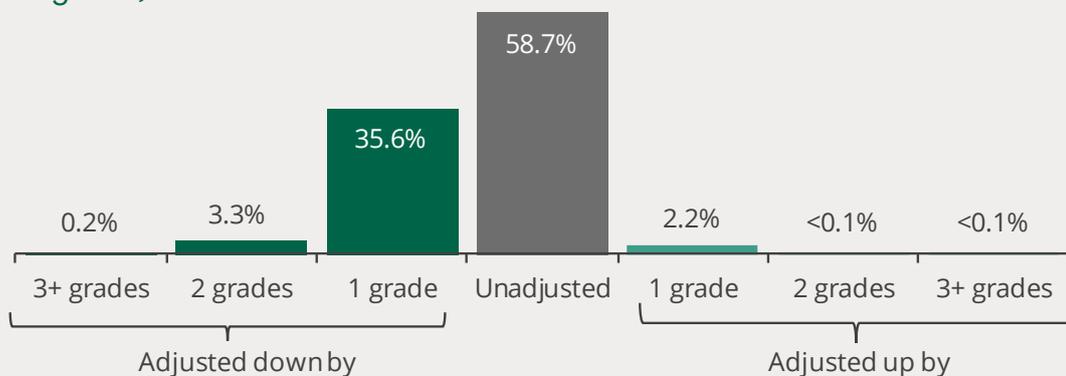
³⁷ Grade 4 is a standard pass and approximately equivalent to an 'old' high D/ low C.

³⁸ As above, Table 9.8

³⁹ Ofqual, [Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020](#) (Table 9.8)

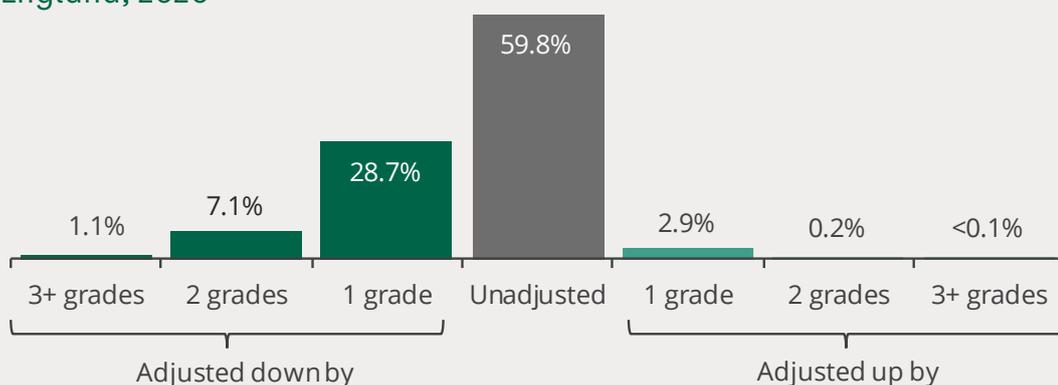
Around 39% of A Level CAGs were revised downwards and 2% were revised upwards

England, 2020



Around 37% of AS Level CAGs were revised downwards and 3% were revised upwards

England, 2020



Source: [Awarding GCSE, AS, A level, advanced extension awards and extended project qualifications: Summer 2020, Ofqual](#). (Table 9.8)

A later [Ofqual report](#), published on 18 December 2020, also looked at CAG adjustments on a student, rather than entry, basis. Of all students who had at least one (but not all) of their A level CAGs adjusted, **the vast majority (92.1%) had downward adjustments only**, a minority of students (4.1%) had upward adjustments only, and (3.7%) had a mix of adjustments.

Ofqual suggests this distribution is not surprising, given that CAGs, overall, were more generous than grading in a normal year, and that [one of the aims](#) of the standardisation process was to maintain standards year-on-year, i.e., protect against uncontrolled grade inflation.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level Update to the interim report](#), December 2020, p9

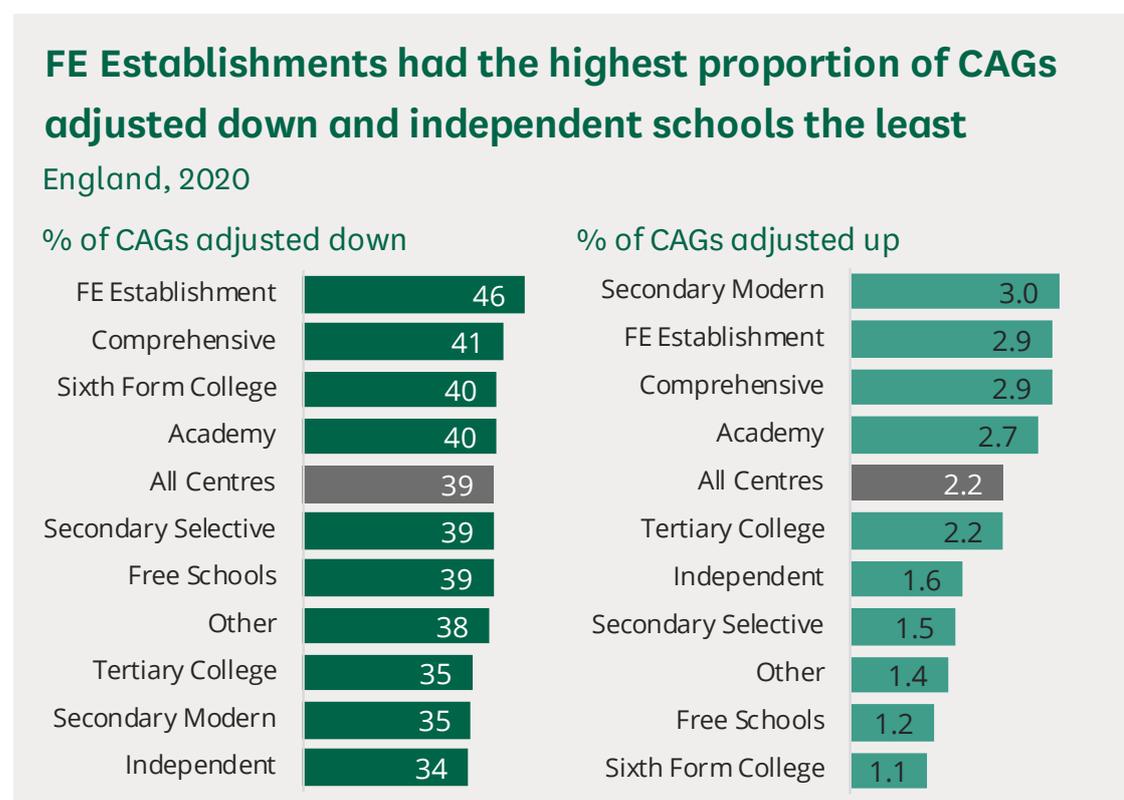
Percentage of CAGs adjusted, by centre type

The [Ofqual report](#) from December 2020 also looked at CAG adjustments broken down by centre type. Ofqual cautions when interpreting these figures:

[I]t is important to bear in mind that they are influenced by the extent to which the CAGs submitted by different schools and colleges were generous, as well as the proportion of small cohorts within particular centres (students in small cohorts received their CAG, since the statistical evidence was not sufficiently reliable to allow standardisation [...])⁴¹

The centre type with the highest proportion of CAGs adjusted downwards were FE establishments (45.6%) and the centre type with the lowest proportion were independent schools (33.8%).

The centre type with the highest proportion of CAGs adjusted upwards were secondary moderns (3.0%), and the centre type with the lowest proportion were sixth form colleges (1.1%).



Notes: Other centres include private candidates. Caution should be taken when making comparisons between centre types.

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p10.

⁴¹ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level Update to the interim report](#), December 2020, p9

Final A Level outcomes compared to 2019

Exam outcomes in 2020 were issued under a very different set of circumstances than other years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This means that caution should be taken when making comparisons over time.

Ofqual's December 2020 [report](#) stated that "overall outcomes were slightly higher than 2019 across the grade range... outcomes had increased by a greater extent at some grades-and in some subjects-than others".⁴²

The table below shows the proportion of final A levels (the higher of the CAG or calculated grade) at each grade in 2020 compared to 2019.

On average, the proportion of entries achieving the top grades exceeded that of 2019. **In 2020, 87.5% of entries achieved grade C or above compared to 75.5% in 2019.**

The grade with the greatest increase in proportion of entries achieving it at A level was at grade A* (+6.6 percentage points compared to 2019), closely followed by grade A (+6.3 percentage points). The grade with the greatest decrease in the proportion of entries achieving it was grade D (-6.0 percentage points).

Proportion of A Level entries achieving each grade			
England, 2020 results compared to 2019			
	2020	2019	Annual change (percentage points)
A*	14.3%	7.7%	+6.6
A	23.8%	17.5%	+6.3
B	27.3%	25.9%	+1.4
C	22.1%	24.4%	-2.3
D	9.3%	15.3%	-6.0
E	2.9%	6.7%	-3.8
U	0.3%	2.5%	-2.2
A*-C	87.5%	75.5%	+12.0

Notes: Includes all subjects. Caution should be taken when comparing 2020 results with 2019 due to the very different circumstances under which they were issued.

Source: JCQ, [GCE A Level & GCSE AS Level Results - Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

⁴² Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p4

Final A Level outcomes by centre type

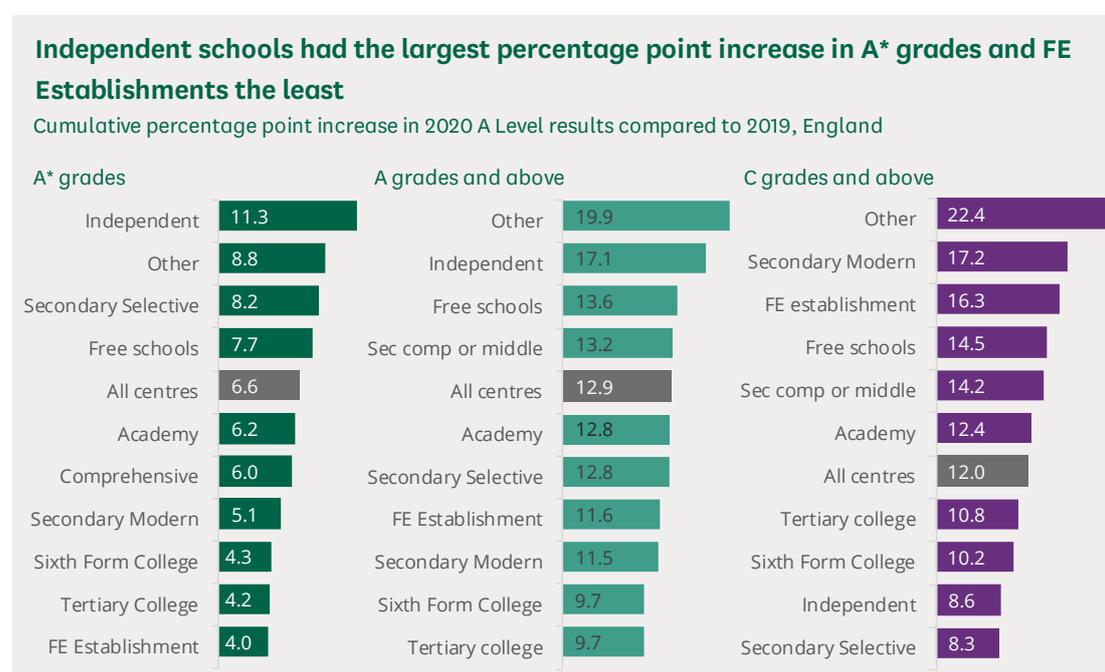
Ofqual’s December 2020 [report](#) compared the proportion of final A levels (the higher of the CAG or calculated grade) awarded at grades A*, A or higher and C or higher, by centre type, in 2020 compared to 2019. This change is expressed as a cumulative percentage point increase.⁴³

Ofqual’s [report](#) stated that “It is clear that the differences in final grades compared to 2019 vary depending on the type of centre and by grade”.⁴⁴

The table below shows that most centres recorded smaller increases in the highest grades compared to the increase at grade C and above. For example, FE Establishments recorded a 16.3 percentage point increase in C grades and above in 2020 compared to 2019, while they recorded only a 4.0 percentage point increase in A* grades.

The reverse trend is observed in a minority of the centre types. For example, independent schools recorded an 8.6 percentage point increase in C grades and above, while they recorded a larger increase in A* grades (+11.3 percentage points).

Ofqual explains that this is “to some extent” due to differences in the cohorts attending different centres. At independent centres there tend to be “more candidates around the top of the grade range – and any change in outcomes is therefore likely to be greatest at the top of the grade range”.⁴⁵



⁴³ Cumulative percentage point change is the percentage point difference in the proportion of pupils that achieved a given grade *or higher*

⁴⁴ Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p6

⁴⁵ Same as above

Notes: Table ranked in order of greatest change in A* awards.⁴⁶

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, ps6-7; JCQ, [GCE A Level & GCSE AS Level Results - Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

GCSE Attainment in 2020

In November 2020 the Department for Education [published](#) national, local authority, and constituency level GCSE attainment data. This data is as announced on 20 August 2020 (any revised grades are not reflected). Unlike in previous years school level data was not published, and Progress 8 scores were also not published for any geography.

GCSE attainment in 2020 should not be compared to previous years due to the very different conditions that grades were awarded.

In 2020 the average Attainment 8 score for pupils attending state-funded schools was 50.2. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 38.6.

In 2020 the average proportion of state-funded pupils achieving grades 9-4 in English and Maths GCSE (broadly comparable to A*-C under the previous letter grade system) was 71.2%. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 49.2%.

In 2020 the average proportion of state-funded pupils achieving grades 9-5 in English and Maths GCSE (broadly comparable to A*-B/high C under the previous letter grade system) was 49.9%. For pupils eligible for free school meals it was 27.8%.⁴⁷

Final GCSE outcomes by centre type

Ofqual's December 2020 [report](#) compared the proportion of final GCSEs awarded at grades 7 and higher, and 4 or higher, by centre type, in 2020 compared to 2019. This change is expressed as a cumulative percentage point increase.⁴⁸

As with making comparisons with A Level outcomes (outlined in the previous section), Ofqual cautions about the effect that differences in the cohorts attending different centres can have on these results.⁴⁹

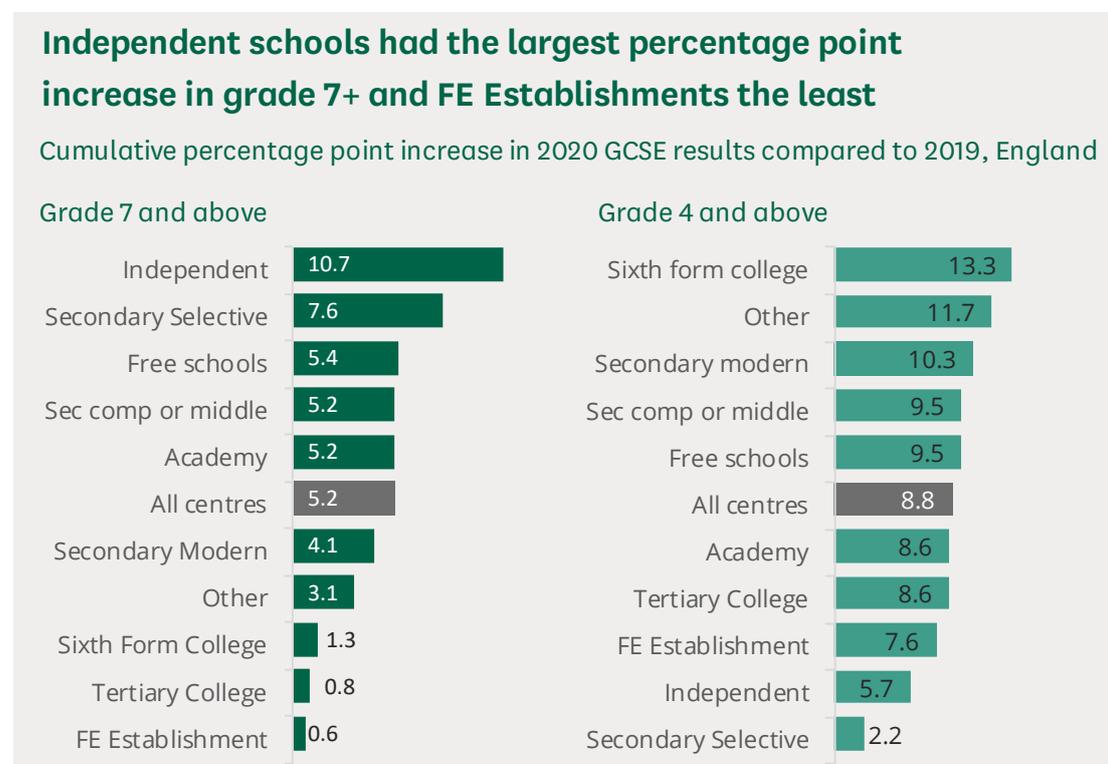
⁴⁶ 'Other' centres include: colleges of higher education, university departments, tutorial colleges, language schools, special schools, pupil referral units (PRU), HM Young Offender Institutions, HM Prisons and training centres

⁴⁷ Department for Education, [Academic Year 2019/20. Key stage 4 performance](#), updated February 2021

⁴⁸ Cumulative percentage point change is the percentage point difference in the proportion of pupils that achieved a given grade or higher

⁴⁹ As above

The table below shows that the percentage point change in grade 7 and above⁵⁰ GCSE awards in 2020 compared to 2019 was highest in independent schools (+10.7 percentage points). It was lowest in Further Education (FE) establishments (+0.6 percentage points). The average increase at this grade level across all centres was +5.2 percentage points.



Notes: Table ranked in order of greatest change in Grade 7 and above.⁵¹

Source: Ofqual, [Summer 2020 results analysis – GCSE, AS and A level. Update to the interim report](#), 18 December 2020, p19; JCQ, [GCSE \(full course\) Results Summer 2020](#), 10 September 2020, p13

Ofqual analysis of student characteristics and 2020 grading: equalities

On 26 November 2020, exams regulator for England, Ofqual, published analyses of grades awarded to candidates studying for both [academic](#) and [vocational or technical](#) qualifications in summer 2020.⁵² The reports consider whether there was bias in outcomes that was attributable to students’ known protected characteristics or socio-economic status. On academic qualifications, Ofqual suggested that final results were not suggestive of

⁵⁰ Grade 7 is approximately equivalent to an old ‘A’ grade

⁵¹ ‘Other’ centres include: colleges of higher education, university departments, tutorial colleges, language schools, special schools, pupil referral units (PRU), HM Young Offender Institutions, HM Prisons and training centres

⁵² Ofqual, [Student-level equalities analyses for GCSE and A level](#), 26 November 2020; Ofqual, [An analysis VTO grades awarded in spring and summer 2020](#), 26 November 2020

systemic disadvantage for any group of candidates sharing particular protected characteristics, or socio-economic status:

For GCSE and A level, [our research](#) compares 2020 A level and GCSE outcomes - centre-assessment grades (CAGs), calculated grades and final grades - with results from 2018 and 2019. We broke down results by students' gender, ethnicity, first language, SEND status, free school meals eligibility and socioeconomic status.

Our evaluation found that had calculated grades been awarded (rather than the final grades awarded), the results would have been more closely in line with the established relationships between student characteristics and outcomes that we see in previous exam results. The changes seen by using final grades are small, however, and do not suggest that any groups of candidates who share particular protected characteristics or socioeconomic status were systemically disadvantaged.

At both GCSE and A level, the most consistent and significant effect was an uplift in outcomes for all groups using CAGs and final grades, but not using calculated grades.

At A level, the attainment gap that had previously seen male candidates outperform female candidates (when other variables are accounted for) narrowed further, having previously narrowed between 2018 and 2019. This suggests the change in the gender attainment gap is a continuation of a trend. This was true for CAGs, calculated grades and final grades.⁵³

Similarly, the report on VTQs pointed to little change in attainment gaps between different groups, compared to previous cohorts:

[The] research shows that grades awarded to those who sat those VTQs earlier this year were not substantially different to grades from previous years, despite the impact of COVID-19. There was, however, for certain types of qualifications, an increase in the number of top grades being awarded.

For the VTQ report, Ofqual researchers collected data from 33 awarding organisations on all learners who were awarded a grade for a Functional Skills, Other General, or Performance Table Qualification between mid-March and the end of July.

Attainment gaps between different demographic groups did not change or increase in most cases. These analyses do not suggest that any groups of candidates who share particular protected characteristics or socioeconomic status were systemically disadvantaged by the impact of the pandemic and the approach to awarding in 2020.

The overall profile of results for this group of qualifications was broadly in line with normal expectations. Ofqual will continue to monitor VTQ results in the months to come.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ofqual news story, '[Summer 2020 outcomes did not systemically disadvantage students](#)', 26 November 2020

⁵⁴ As above

4.2

Awarding in Scotland in 2020

Scotland's original approach to awarding qualifications in 2020 was similar, but not identical, to that proposed for England, in that it used a combination of teacher assessment and moderation. Information on Scotland's original awarding methodology can be found on the [Scottish Qualification Authority's \(SQA\) website](#).

Scottish exam results for National 5s, Highers, and Advanced Highers were announced on 4 August 2020. Press reports noted that large numbers of students had received lower grades than they might have expected.⁵⁵

In a statement six days later, on Monday 10 August 2020, First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon said that in reference to exam awarding, the Scottish Government "did not get this right, and I am sorry for that". She added that "too many students felt they had lost out", as a result of "a statistical model or an algorithm", and that the burden had not fallen equally across society.⁵⁶

Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, made a further statement in the Scottish Parliament the following day, Tuesday 11 August 2020. In this, he apologised to students who received lower grades than they were expecting, but noted that three-quarters of grades were not adjusted during the statistical process at all. He said that the Scottish Government would:

- Require that all awards that were downgraded following statistical standardisation were withdrawn, and reissued based solely on teacher or lecturer judgement.
- Ensure affected students got fresh certificates.
- Permit learners whose grade was increased following statistical moderation, to keep those grades.
- Ensure that there were sufficient places in universities for the 2020-21 academic year.
- Commission an independent review of the awarding process, led by Professor Mark Priestly, of the University of Stirling.⁵⁷

The Scottish Government published [its response](#) to Prof. Priestly's rapid review on 7 October 2020.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ See e.g., '[Scotland's results day: Thousands of pupils have exam grades lowered](#)', BBC News, 4 August 2020

⁵⁶ Nicola Sturgeon speech, '[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) update: First Minister's speech 10 August 2020](#)', 10 August 2020

⁵⁷ Statement to the Scottish Parliament, [Examination Results](#), 11 August 2020

⁵⁸ Scottish Government, '[National Qualifications experience 2020 - rapid review: our response](#)', 7 October 2020

4.3

Awarding in Wales in 2020

In Wales, similarly, the original intention had been to award grades for GCSEs, AS and A Levels using a combination of centre assessment, and statistical standardisation. An overview of the approach originally planned can be found in this [briefing](#) published on 3 April 2020, by Qualifications Wales.⁵⁹

However, on 17 August 2020, Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, announced that grades for GCSEs, AS, A Levels and some other qualifications would instead be awarded based on centre assessed grades, unless they had been revised upwards as a result of statistical standardisation. In that case, the student would be allowed to keep the higher grade.⁶⁰

The Welsh Government subsequently asked Louise Casella, Director of the Open University in Wales, to lead an independent review of the summer 2020 awarding process. The review's interim report was published in October 2020.⁶¹

4.4

Awarding in Northern Ireland in 2020

As for the other UK nations, Northern Ireland planned to use a combination of centre assessment and statistical adjustment in order to award GCSEs, AS and A Level grades in summer 2020.

An overview of the original approach to awarding qualifications regulated by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) can be found in a CCEA news article published on 16 April 2020.⁶²

On 16 August 2020, Education Minister, Peter Weir, announced that GCSE students would be awarded solely based on centre assessment.⁶³ The following day, he announced that AS and A Level students would be allowed to keep whichever was the highest grade – i.e., either the centre assessed grade, or the post-statistical standardisation grade they had already been issued with by that point.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Qualifications Wales, [Centre Assessment Grades. Frequently Asked Questions](#), 3 April 2020

⁶⁰ See: Welsh Government press release, '[Statement from the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams](#)', 17 August 2020

⁶¹ Independent review of the summer 2020 arrangements to award grades, and considerations for summer 2021: [Interim report](#), October 2020

⁶² Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, '[CCEA announces how GCSEs, AS and A levels will be Awarded in Summer 2020](#)', 16 April 2020

⁶³ See: Department of Education news story, '[Centre Assessed Grades to be awarded at GCSE in Northern Ireland](#)', 16 August 2020

⁶⁴ See Department of Education news story, '[Changes to AS and A level awards in Northern Ireland](#)', 17 August 2020

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