



Guidance

Supporting resilience in the exam system in 2023

Published 30 November 2022

Applies to England

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Introduction

The national cancellation of exams – and the need for alternative assessment arrangements – is now very unlikely. The government does not expect to ever be in the situation again where exams do not go ahead, but good public policy means having contingency, even for extremely unlikely scenarios.

Ofqual has therefore provided guidance for all schools and colleges on the steps they should take to collect and retain evidence in the academic year 2022 to 2023 in the unlikely event that exams cannot go ahead as planned. In 2022, we required exam boards to notify all exam centres about the contingency guidance in place and its importance. We expect to do this again for this guidance.

This guidance covers GCSEs, AS and A levels, Project qualifications, and the Advanced Extension Award (AEA) in mathematics.

Guidance on collecting evidence of student performance in academic year 2022 to 2023

The scope of assessments

Centres should plan assessment opportunities in line with their usual assessment approaches, unless they conclude that there is any reason to vary them to make sure they have collected appropriate evidence. Evidence gathered should be sufficient that a school or college is confident that, taken together, the evidence is an appropriate assessment of the knowledge, understanding and skills of the student for that qualification.

Teachers should plan so that the evidence gathered assesses students on a wide range of content, similar to that which they will expect in their summer exams, and across the assessment objectives for the qualification. Students should normally only be assessed on content they have been taught. They should plan both the assessment opportunities, and when they take place, in ways they judge will best support their students in preparing for their exams. Assessments should, therefore, normally take place in the last year of study for the qualification. The total assessment time should not normally exceed the total time students would spend taking exams for the relevant qualification, plus any time spent on non-exam assessment.

Teachers should guard against over-assessment and normally would not need to spend longer on these assessments than they would on their existing assessment arrangements. In both 2021 and 2022 Ofqual saw examples of over-assessment for this purpose, which we consider to be unnecessary and counter to supporting students as they prepare for their exams. We are keen that students benefit from the opportunities they are given to prepare for their exams, and certainly are not adversely affected by taking too many assessments.

Centres might choose to carry out other assessments across the year that are not for the purpose of evidence collection.

The conditions under which students should be assessed

Teachers should assess their students to provide them with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in ways that cover the assessment objectives for the qualification.

Students taking GCSEs, AS and A levels and the Advanced Extension Award should be assessed under exam-like conditions wherever possible. For example, students:

- should not know the questions in the assessment beforehand
- should work independently and without assistance (other than as required for a reasonable adjustment)
- should not have access to books or revision notes
- should be supervised during the assessment, though centres do not have to use external invigilation
- should be assessed under timed conditions equivalent to those under which they would expect to complete the assessment (or part of an assessment) during their exam

This will both help to ensure that the work is authentic and, given that this reflects the conditions under which formal exams would be taken, it will prepare students for exams in the summer. This is also likely to align with existing assessment arrangements in many schools and colleges. Noting the need to minimise burden and the impact on resources, these controls could be provided within a classroom rather than exam hall setting.

Wherever possible, a centre should either assess all its students who are taking a particular qualification using the same material at the same time or using different materials at different times. Where this is not possible, centres should seek to ensure that students are not able to predict the materials they are going to be assessed on.

Reasonable adjustments must be made for disabled students, in accordance with equalities law, and as explained in this document.

The assessment materials

The assessments should be as useful as possible for students preparing to take summer exams. Assessments should, therefore, be similar to full or parts of the exam papers they are preparing to take next summer and should be based on exam board materials as far as possible.

Student awareness

It should be made clear to students that it is expected that exams and formal assessments will go ahead as planned. They should be made aware that any assessment evidence collected and retained under this guidance would be used to determine grades only in the unlikely situation that they could not. However, students should be told, where possible, before taking any assessment, whether their performance in the assessment would be used as part of evidence to determine a grade for them if exams cannot go ahead as planned.

In exceptional circumstances, it might be necessary for assessments that were not taken in line with this guidance to be used as evidence to inform a grade should exams not go ahead as planned. This could be, for example, where a student misses the centre's planned assessments because of serious illness. In such cases the student might not have been told in advance of taking the assessment that their performance might be used as evidence. Guidance would be provided on this if exams cannot proceed as expected.

Reasonable adjustments for disabled students

The same reasonable adjustments that will be made for disabled students taking exams in the summer should, where possible, be applied to the assessments. Records should be made of the adjustments and the reasons for them. The centre should record the reason why any reasonable adjustment was not made.

If a student's need for a reasonable adjustment is only identified after an assessment has taken place, their teacher should record the reason for this late identification. Where possible, they should allow the student to take a different, but equivalent, assessment with the reasonable adjustment in place.

Special consideration for students whose performance is affected by an event outside their control

If a teacher is satisfied that a student's performance in one or more of the assessments was affected by an event that was outside of the student's control at the time of, or immediately before, the assessment, such as illness or family bereavement, the teacher should mark the assessment as normal. The issues should also be recorded so that it could be taken into account should it be necessary to determine a Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG).

Centres should make sure students know they need to tell their teachers before, or immediately after, the assessment of any events outside their control that might affect their performance.

Marking

Teachers should mark the assessments in line with published exam board mark schemes and guidance where appropriate. Centres should support teachers in their centre to mark work for the same qualification to the same standard.

As these arrangements are intended to support the existing internal assessment process, students should be given feedback, which could include marks or comments. Students should not repeat assessments with the same questions following such feedback for the purpose of evidence collection. Students may, however, repeat assessments where not for the purpose of evidence collection.

Teachers may tell the student the grade at which their performance in the assessment indicates they have performed. Teachers must make it clear to their students that any grade used to indicate the level at which they have performed is not an indication of what their final grade would be if it became necessary to award a qualification using the evidence. It will not be possible for a teacher to determine a final grade unless Ofqual sets specific guidance on this, which we will only do if exams do not go ahead.

Ofqual has confirmed that GCSE, AS and A levels will return to pre-pandemic grading in 2023, as planned. There were different approaches to grading in autumn 2020 and 2021 and summer 2022, which resulted in greater leniency in grade boundaries. Teachers should take this into account when using 2020, 2021 or 2022 grade boundaries to provide an indicative grade for students. For example, where students are towards the lower range of the given grade boundary, it is likely to be more appropriate for teachers to judge the student to be performing at the lower grade given the return to pre-pandemic grading standards for 2023. This will also support teachers where the assessment undertaken also informs decisions on predicted grades, be that for use internally or for external use such as UCAS predictions.

Retention of the work

Student work, either the original or a copy, must always be retained by the centre. Student work can be retained digitally or physically. Students may be given copies, or the original work, where this would support their learning.

Disruption to the assessments

Significant disruption to education, for example illness, or a major incident such as a fire or flood, may mean assessments cannot be completed for all or some of a centre's students in line with this guidance. Where this is the case, centres should take reasonable steps to collect evidence of each student's knowledge and understanding in ways that align as far as possible with this guidance. Centres should be prepared to explain the exceptional reasons why they have not been able to gather evidence in line with this guidance for all or some of their students if exams could not take place. Centres are not expected to deviate from the guidance to accommodate minor disruptions to a student's education.

Non-exam assessment

Where a GCSE, AS or A level includes non-exam assessment (NEA), such as a dance or music performance, teachers should support their students, wherever

possible, to complete that assessment in line with the timescales set by exam boards. Should exams be cancelled, teachers would be expected to take a student's NEA into account when determining a TAG.

Project qualifications and GCSE, AS and A level art & design qualifications

Students taking Project and GCSE, AS and A level qualifications do not take exams in any year. Teachers do not, therefore, need to carry out any additional assessment of students taking these qualifications in case exams cannot take place. They should support students, wherever possible, to complete their non-exam assessments in line with the timescales set by exam boards.

Private candidates

Private candidates are typically home educated or students who are re-taking a qualification having left the school or college where they originally studied. They may be studying with a distance learning provider, tutor, parent, or without any such support.

In normal years, when exams take place, private candidates register with a centre, which arranges for the candidate to take their exams alongside the centre's students. As exams are expected to take place in 2023, centres are encouraged to allow private candidates to register with them in the usual way.

Some private candidates might want centres to assess them during the academic year, alongside the centre's students, in line with this guidance. Centres may agree to do so, although they would need to make sure the assessments only covered content the private candidate had studied. Alternatively, private candidates could be assessed only in the unlikely event it is confirmed that exams will not take place as intended, in which case they would be assessed in a compressed period.

Exceptionally, similar arrangements might also apply to students that move centres during the academic year if, for that student, the timing of their entry to the centre means there is no opportunity to collect evidence of their performance. Although in many cases where students change centre, the centre will have sufficient time to gather evidence for a student. Alternatively, this will not be necessary because students have already collected evidence at a previous centre which could be accessed if needed.

If the government considers that national exams cannot take place, the Department for Education would, as it did during the pandemic, explore ways to encourage centres to work with private candidates and consider options to provide affordable opportunities for private candidates to work with centres.

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