



# Covid tests: school exams in 2022 and beyond

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## Summary

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many, often unprecedented problems for schools and the wider education system. Teachers and leaders have had to scramble to switch almost entirely to remote teaching, provide IT equipment – and food – to lower-income pupils, and establish workable isolation policies and mass testing. All this has been done amid a deluge of changing advice and guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) and Public Health England (PHE).

Alongside this schools have had to manage two exam cycles in which no exams took place. In 2020 the government attempted to replace the exams with an algorithm designed to allocate grades based on previous school performance: when that failed, it reverted to grades awarded by schools. In 2021, having missed the opportunity to put better arrangements in place by electing not to make contingency plans for a prolonged crisis, it reverted again to teacher-assessed grades when exams were cancelled. Inevitably this has led to significant grade inflation given the lack of 'reliability'<sup>\*</sup> in the process, and left many individual students being treated unfairly.

Everyone hopes that in 2022 pupils will be able to sit exams in a normal fashion, though given the nature of the pandemic this cannot be guaranteed. However, even if they can be sat as usual, next year's exams cannot be assessed in the usual way, for two reasons. First, because those year groups taking exams in 2022 have already missed a considerable amount of schooling and, in many cases, are behind where they would normally be at this point. Second, due to large increases in grades in 2020 and 2021, reverting back to normal grading would heavily penalise the 2022 cohort.

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<sup>\*</sup> Reliability is a technical assessment term and can be defined as "the extent to which an assessment method or instrument measures consistently the performance of the student".

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DfE and England's exams regulator Ofqual\* are currently consulting for adjustments to the 2022 exams that include allowing pupils a wider choice of topics for some papers, giving advance warning of likely questions, and allowing exam aides (for example formula sheets) into some exams.<sup>1</sup> With a few notable exceptions these are broadly supported by the profession, but are unlikely to be enough to make up for lost learning, especially as this loss is not evenly distributed across the country, income bands or types of school.

This makes the question of grading even more important. DfE and Ofqual have not made any proposals on this and are waiting to analyse the 2021 results before doing so. The mechanism for grading in England – called 'comparable outcomes' – is unusually complex compared with many European countries, and designed to avoid grade inflation. Grade boundaries are only set after marks are submitted by examiners to ensure the 'right' proportion of pupils get each grade. How Ofqual chooses to define 'right' in the context of the pandemic and two years of highly inflated teacher assessed grades is an exceptionally tricky problem.

As well as making a decision on grading for 2022, DfE and Ofqual also need to consider the longer-term lessons of the past two years for assessment in England. The pandemic has raised serious questions around the resilience and appropriateness of the current assessment system. Other European countries that do not base their entire assessment on final exams have found it easier to manage. Moreover, the failures of the exams-based system highlight broader problems with a model of assessment that is expensive, cumbersome and whose predominance can seriously distort the curriculum.

## Recommendations

- **Grades in 2022 should be tied to 2020 outcomes**, rather than reverting to the 2019 grades as a baseline. Pupils in 2022 are more likely to be competing for university places (and thereafter) graduate jobs with the 2021 and 2020 cohort than the 2019 one; on balance, this outweighs concerns around unfairness on earlier cohorts and 'baking in' grade inflation.
- Whatever decision is taken on grading **the government must issue clear guidance to universities, further education institutions and employers** to ensure they understand the differences between cohorts when they make selection decisions.
- **Ofqual should publish a resilience strategy in 2022** so that England's schools system is better prepared for future crises at national or local level. This should look at options such as having essays written earlier during the course where appropriate and marked using 'comparative judgement', where markers compare papers and rank them rather than try to apply a mark scheme.
- **DfE and Ofqual should set up a full review of secondary assessment** to consider broader reform, particularly of GCSEs. Exams play an important role in both providing certification for pupils and holding schools accountable, but the recent controversies mean there is a risk that the exams system as a whole becomes entirely undermined, possibly even being scrapped by a future government.

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\* This paper focuses on England only as education is a devolved function.

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## Why the government has a 2022 exams problems

England has a very unusual assessment system in secondary schools. While most countries have some external assessment\* at the end of lower secondary school, few have as comprehensive a set of exams as GCSEs. This is because GCSEs are atypically high stakes for both pupils and schools. Another unusual aspect of the English education system is that UK universities make selection decisions before A-levels results come in and so use pupils' GCSEs (along with predicted A-level grades) in the admissions process. For schools, GCSEs are the primary metric of accountability: England has extremely strong sanctions for schools that underperform and it is not uncommon for headteachers to lose their jobs. In addition, England has competitive for-profit exam boards that have an incentive to attract schools with the promise of easier papers and better grades.

This pressure on pupils, schools and exam boards creates conditions for significant annual grade inflation – with robust regulation required to prevent it. To provide this, Ofqual was established in 2008 as an independent regulator, and became a non-ministerial government department in 2010. As one of its duties is to maintain standards, in 2011 it introduced a grading process called 'comparable outcomes' as a way to ensure minimal change in exam results between years. In this system, grade boundaries are set after marks are submitted; data from the Key Stage 2 tests that the relevant cohort sat at the end of primary school is used to decide how many of each grade should be awarded, preventing the percentage of each grade awarded from changing much year on year.

Exam boards can make a case that grades in a particular subject should go higher if they have genuine evidence of standards rising, though this rarely happens outside small-cohort subjects. Since 2017 they have also been able to make use of the National Reference Test (NRT), which assesses a sample of pupils in English and Maths every year, with no stakes attached, so as to create a real measure of whether standards are changing over time.\*\*

In a normal year the application of comparable outcomes makes relatively little difference; percentages of grades typically would not be significantly altered using the same boundaries as the previous year, as there is rarely much change, in practice, from cohort to cohort.<sup>2</sup> However when a major change is made to exams themselves its application can be significant. When substantial reforms to A-levels were implemented for summer 2017, comparable outcomes prevented a drop in results that would have occurred from students and teachers coming to terms with redesigned qualifications.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside tighter regulation to hold grades in check DfE, under Michael Gove, also introduced a set of reforms to GCSEs and A-levels that were in part designed to make them more reliable. GCSEs modules, which allowed pupils to take papers throughout

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\* Exams or other types of assessment marked by people outside of the school the pupil attends.

\*\* Assessments have traditionally been either criteria-referenced or norm-referenced. Criteria-referenced means that everyone meeting a pre-defined set of criteria are awarded the associated grade (e.g. a driving test); norm-referenced mean everyone is ranked and then a pre-set percentage are awarded each grade. Comparable outcomes is closer to the latter but not the same thing as it can and does change based on actual performance.

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their course, were scrapped.\* Controlled assessment – work done in classrooms and overseen by teachers that itself had replaced coursework in 2009 – was removed from most subjects. AS-levels, taken in the academic year after GCSEs on route to a full A-level, allowing for a two-stage assessment, were stopped as well, partly to create one year in the final three years of school without exams.\*\*

In 2020, after exams were first abandoned due to the pandemic, Ofqual and the DfE were therefore keen to avoid grade inflation that would wipe out their reform efforts over the previous decade. They attempted to maintain standards by using a statistical process – ‘the algorithm’ – to allocate grades. They asked schools to rank pupils in each subject and then used those ranks to assign a grade based on the previous performance of that school. Each school ended up with a quota of grades for each subject.\*\*\*

Inevitably this process led to some anomalous and discriminatory situations where for instance a pupil could be predicted a B grade by the school but end up with an E grade simply because they were the lowest ranked and the school was allocated one E grade by the algorithm to use up. Ofqual chose not to address these anomalies by making adjustments in advance of grades being released to pupils on the basis of legal advice. Had it done so it may have been able to make this system work, as it did in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

However, the furore around unfair grades was too strong and the government had to revert to grades awarded by schools that were significantly more generous. In 2020, 38.1% of A-levels were graded A\* or A compared with 25.2% in 2019 – a percentage increase of over 50% (see Figure 1 overleaf). GCSE inflation was less pronounced, but still saw a big increase, with GCSE grades 9–7s going from 20.6% in 2019 to 25.9% in 2020, a percentage increase of just over 25%.<sup>5</sup> These school-assessed grades were also unfair, albeit in a different way from the algorithm, as schools had taken different approaches to awarding grades, some being more robust than others. The result appeared to show that people are in general still more happy to accept human error than that generated by a computer, even if more significant.

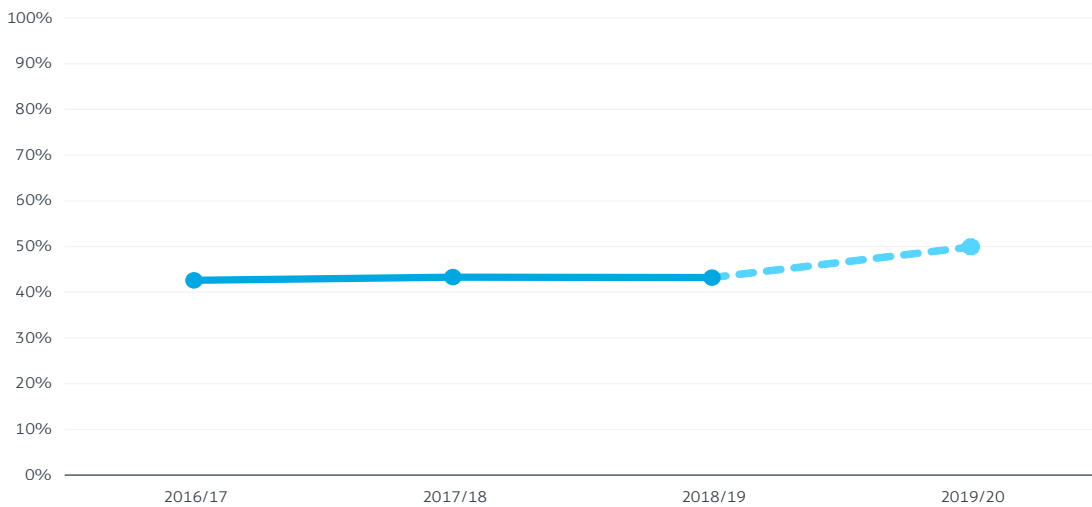
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\* There was also a pedagogical reason for ending modular GCSEs in that it limited the ability to teach and assess synoptically (i.e. drawing links between different parts of the course – as some parts were completed well before others.)

\*\* AS-levels still exist as standalone qualifications in England.

\*\*\* This model couldn't be applied to subject cohorts with small entries that led to smaller schools doing lots of esoteric subjects, often private schools, getting a significant benefit.

Figure 1 **Key stage 4: Grade 5 or above in English and Maths in state-funded schools**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Department for Education, GCSE and Equivalent results.

DfE hoped to run exams in 2021, with some adjustments designed to acknowledge lost learning during Covid-related school absences. It was so determined to do so that it refused to engage in any public conversation about a 'Plan B', or according to a No.10 insider conduct any contingency planning at all, if exams did need to be cancelled. This obstinance meant when they were again cancelled, in January 2021, Ofqual had few options but to revert back to teacher-awarded grades.

The range of 'evidence' that schools were allowed to take into account was so broad as to ensure no chance of meaningful reliability of results across the cohort. Schools could use work done in class, or their own exams done under a range of different conditions, or past papers (that some students may have already seen) and so on. 2021 results have also shown substantial increases in grades, including a record number of A\* and As for A-levels taken in England – 44.3% of entries, up from 38.1% in 2020. This was inevitable, given the clear incentive is to give students the benefit of the doubt whenever possible. The system has, again, been unfair on those pupils whose schools have used more robust approaches to decide on grades.

## **Adaptations to exams in 2022**

DfE and Ofqual intend to return to in-person exams in 2022. They have at least, this time, acknowledged that due to the uncertainties of the pandemic this may not be possible. They have announced they will release contingency plans in the autumn term based on their analysis of the 2021 results

Assuming exams do go ahead they are faced with two substantial problems. First, that learning time lost during school absences has made it hard for teachers to cover their entire course. What makes this problem particularly difficult is that the learning loss is not evenly distributed. Pupils in the north of England have, on average, missed more time than those in the south. Those from wealthier families have missed less time than

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those from low-income households. Family circumstances are a factor too: time out of school has been more productive for those pupils who had access to technology, their own space and at least some of their parents' time.<sup>6</sup>

This means that simply reducing course content, for example, would end up allowing some students to catch up but leave others repeatedly revising content they had already learned, and so missing out on the range of learning they would otherwise have had. Equally, making no adjustments to content would mean an unknown number of pupils were simply not able to cover the necessary material, putting them at a clear disadvantage.

In its consultation Ofqual has tried to square this circle by making a series of different types of adjustment to different papers at GCSE level. For popular essay-heavy papers – English Literature, History and Geography – it is proposing that exam boards offer a choice of topics in the exams. This means pupils won't have to revise as many topics. For most other GCSE subjects it is proposing that the exam boards provide advance information, in the spring, about the content of the exams. The aim is to ensure the full course is taught where possible but allow pupils to use their revision time in a more focused manner given many will have had less time on certain topics than usual. In English Language and Maths there will be no advance information or choice of topics given the critical importance of learning the full curriculum in those core subjects.

Finally, Ofqual has proposed that pupils be allowed formula sheets in the exam room for Maths, Physics and Combined Science.

At AS and A-level the plans are more straightforward. It is proposing that for all subjects advance information about the content of exams should be made available in the spring.

These proposals are largely reasonable in the circumstances but do mean that the exams will not be comparable to other, pre-pandemic, years and will lose some level of reliability. This is because they will be examining a smaller portion of the curriculum and so will accordingly give less information about the relative knowledge and skills of pupils.

Moreover the changes have been announced late, leaving some schools at a disadvantage. The choice between two topics in Geography that would typically both be mandatory, for example, is not very helpful if a teacher has already invested considerable time in teaching both of them. Indeed it could put them at a disadvantage against schools that have *not* yet taught both, which can opt for the one already begun to ensure they will use all their time solely for content that will be examined. Likewise having a formula sheet is only helpful if you've taught pupils how to use the formula.

Fundamentally, changes made to limit the scope of exams will not fully address the learning loss, which makes the question of how exams are graded even more important.

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## The intractable grading problem for 2022 exams

In its consultation Ofqual does not address the problem of grading, saying it wants to see the 2021 results before doing so. It is not surprising it has left its most intractable problem to deal with later. Given Ofqual's legal duty to maintain standards, the most technically correct approach would be to use the 2019 results as the benchmark for comparability and then use the National Reference Test (NRT) to assess whether standards have really improved or fallen. The amount of learning lost through the pandemic makes it likely that real standards will have fallen to some degree – so a correct application of comparable outcomes in 2022 would lead not just to significantly lower results than 2021 but likely lower than 2019.

Alternatively, results could be 'pinned to' teacher assessed grades from 2020 or 2021. While this would undoubtedly be fairer to the 2022 cohorts, it would also be a clear violation of Ofqual's legal duty to maintain standards given 2020 and 2021 results are by definition not reliable or comparable to exams taken in previous years. It would also be unfair to those who took exams in 2019 or before. Another option would be to return to the 2019 standard gradually over several years so as not to seriously disadvantage any cohort. However, this would mean multiple years had an arbitrary basis for grading and were again not properly comparable with results in other years, leading to an extended period of unfair competition for university places and jobs.

While this is not a technically difficult problem it is ethically and politically tricky. The options, with their benefits and costs, are set out in table overleaf. There is no solution that is not in some way unfair to some cohorts: the price of allowing two years of significant and unjustified increases. Ofqual acknowledges this in its consultation:

**"[We are] also considering how best to grade qualifications in 2022 in a way that is as fair as possible to students in that year, those who took qualifications in previous years, and those who will take them in future. Ofqual has statutory responsibility for the maintenance of standards and for public confidence in qualifications, while taking account of government policy. Ofqual will make a decision once 2021 results are known, and will announce its decisions in the autumn."**

Table 1 Trade-offs for exam grading options in 2022

Options for grading in 2022	Benefits	Costs
<b>Option One:</b> revert back to 2019 standards and use NRT	Return to the 'gold standard' with a clear rationale for grades in the future; everything consistent except for the two pandemic years with no exams.	Very unfair on 2022 cohort who will be competing for university places/jobs with students from '20 and '21 cohorts, and who have suffered more learning loss than either group.
<b>Option Two:</b> revert back to 2019 standards without NRT	Allow for deflation back to 2019 standard without additionally 'punishing' 2022 cohort for learning loss suffered during the pandemic.	Still unfair on 2022 cohort who will be competing for university places/jobs with students from '20 and '21 cohorts. Not fully comparable with 2019.
<b>Option Three:</b> revert back to 2019 over three cohorts	Allows for a more gentle deflation back to a standard consistent with pre-pandemic years, reducing harm to any individual cohort.	Unfair to three cohorts, each slightly more so than the last. No consistent standard for six consecutive years.
<b>Option Four:</b> permanently rebase to the 2020 or 2021 standard	Fair to 2022 and subsequent cohorts who have suffered learning loss.	Unfair to cohorts from 2019 and earlier who were assessed against a more difficult standard. Grade inflation 'baked in' to the system, complicating university admissions.

On balance we recommend option four using grades from 2020 rather than 2021, as this year's results are so high as to make the university admissions system potentially unworkable. We choose this option for two reasons. First, it would not be fair to build the impact of learning loss into results for 2022 cohorts, which would happen if Ofqual followed its comparable outcomes policy to the letter. Second, the 2022 cohort is more likely to be competing against pupils from 2021 and 2020 than 2019, both for places in higher and further education and for graduate jobs. It would heavily penalise them to return to the harder 2019 standard. To pursue this option DfE may need to formally direct Ofqual to use the 2020 results as a benchmark to allow them to set aside their legal duty to maintain standards.



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The downside of this approach is that grades become rebased for as long as exams are in this form: grades from before 2019 would never be comparable to grades afterwards. This is particularly problematic with GCSEs as the grading system has only recently been changed (in 2017). This means that an employer looking at three candidates – who sat GCSEs in 2015, 2018 and 2022 respectively – would have to understand the differences between three different systems to make a fair comparison.

If the government does go down this route it needs to provide information to employers and higher/further education institutions to explain the differences between '2019 and before grades' and '2020 and after grades'. It is concerning that in the government's understandable desire to maintain confidence in the system ministers have not properly acknowledged the discontinuity that could disadvantage earlier cohorts. The clearest way to do this would be to make a small change to the grades themselves so they were distinguished (for instance 1 could become C1 to acknowledge it came after Covid). But if the government does not want to do this it should at least ensure that information is provided indicating the scale of inflation and explaining the rebasing of grades.\*

Another downside is that using 2020 as a baseline for A-levels will make it harder for selective universities to differentiate between students. In 2020, 22.5% of students got three A\* or A grades in their A-levels compared with 12.3% in 2019.<sup>7</sup> This will probably lead to highly selective universities making increased use of their own tests. This trend has been growing anyway with a wide variety of subject-based admissions tests now required at highly selective universities.<sup>8</sup> This represents a threat to equality of opportunity, as private schools and selective state schools with more experience of Russell Group universities will be better placed to train their students for a range of university-specific tests, and wealthier parents better able to afford tutoring and resources related to these tests.

## **Beyond 2022: Increasing the resilience of the exam system**

Alongside the specific challenges for 2022, the pandemic has posed broader questions about the resilience of assessment in England. The exam system in England is particularly prone to the kind of disruption seen in the past two years because everything is done through end-of-course written assessments. There is good reason for this. The relative importance of GCSE grades for pupils and schools means reliability is unusually important. Once high stakes are attached to an assessment, getting the best result, by any means available, tends to take precedent over other educational considerations. Using things like coursework and teacher assessment may work in a system where stakes are lower and there is little incentive to try and boost results artificially.

We know, though, that when coursework was used here there was widespread cheating. And even when rules were tightened up by introducing controlled assessments (done in the classroom) many schools interpreted the rules around support for pupils in a very generous way.<sup>9</sup>

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\* Whatever option it chooses, it will need to provide clear information to stakeholders about the differences between cohorts but it's particularly important if grades are to be permanently rebased.

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This is not a criticism. Once a loophole is available it is understandable that schools will seek to use it so as not to harm their pupils' future versus those at other schools using the same tactics.

Nevertheless, doing everything through end-of-course written exams does put huge pressure on those assessments. Even in a normal year there will be many thousands of pupils who are unwell in the week of a crucial set of exams, or have recently suffered a bereavement, and so on. And as the past two academic years have shown all too well, a major shock that prevents exams happening at a local or national level makes it very hard to provide a grade.

Considering the type of skills being assessed would help address this imbalance. For instance, in a subject like Maths two different examiners will typically be very close in their marks for a paper; questions are bounded and have a right answer. In a subject like English Literature, you can approximate this with short comprehension questions, but for longer essay-style questions it is much harder to get agreement between two markers – an Ofqual study found that markers only agreed with its expert marker 50% of the time when grading English Literature GCSEs.<sup>10</sup> Exam boards have tried to bound longer essay questions with increasingly restrictive mark schemes but have struggled to get better reliability. This is the worst of both worlds: unreliable grading and mark schemes that restrict pupils' ability to think creatively in longer-form responses.

One option to consider would be to restrict written exams to question types that are more reliable but then have longer essays assessed in a different way. These could be done in a controlled exam-style environment at several stages during the course.<sup>\*</sup> Rather than mark them in the conventional way, exam boards could use 'comparative judgement' whereby lots of markers compare two papers side by side and rank them. Done enough times this produces a rank order that can be turned into grades that evidence suggests are more accurate than traditional marking for these types of questions.<sup>11</sup>

In a normal year these differently assessed essays could be combined with written exam grades; in the event of disruption to final exams, essay subjects could be assessed entirely using these responses, while a shorter set of exams focused on subjects like Maths and science could be run instead of the full programme.

Focusing end-of-course exams on more easily assessed short questions would also make it easier to create an online back-up system for exams so they could be conducted at home in cases of national, local or even individual disruption. The challenge of home assessment is that it is very hard to prevent cheating, but with papers that ask lots of short questions that need to be answered quickly, this is less of a concern than with pupils writing essays at home. Another safeguard that could be put in place for such a system would be to retest a sample of pupils once it was safe to do so. This would at least create an incentive not to cheat given the risk of being caught out if you were then included in a sample check (in essence the mechanism HMRC uses to guard against adults lying on their self-assessed tax returns).

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<sup>\*</sup> Unlike fully modular exams this would still allow for synoptic assessment in the end of course written papers.

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These changes could be done for A-levels as well as GCSEs. It is also worth the government and Ofqual considering whether to reverse the abolition of AS-levels. During the current crisis these would have provided an additional, more recent assessment on which grades could be based for at least the 2020 cohort. Ultimately Wales followed England in going with teacher assessed grades in 2020 but they could have awarded based on AS-levels as they did not abolish them when England did.\*

Moreover AS-levels gave universities additional externally assessed information on which to base selection decisions. Without them they have had to become more reliant on GCSEs (as they were before AS levels were introduced), pushing the stakes around those exams ever higher, and on predicted grades that are known to be wildly unreliable.<sup>12</sup>

There will undoubtedly be other ideas that could help increase the resilience of England's exam system including, for instance, using AI marking rather than requiring large numbers of human examiners every year (although that will require politicians to get more comfortable with the use of technology in assessment). Ofqual should publish a resilience strategy in the next year setting out how to make England's assessment system more resistant to shocks.

## **Beyond 2022: The opportunity for a fuller review of the purposes and implementation of assessment**

As we have seen, whatever decision the government takes on grading there will be no comparability between cohorts over the 2019–23 period and quite possibly beyond. Given this inevitable discontinuity it is worth considering whether the government wants to use the opportunity to make more substantive changes to the way GCSEs and A-levels work. The pandemic has exposed how prone to disruption the current exams system is, given their oversized importance within the English education system. The recommendations above are aimed primarily at resilience, not wholesale reform: even in normal years exams are very expensive and time consuming, while their importance leads them to dominate the curriculum all the way back through secondary school, causing serious distortion.

Pressure had already been growing to look at GCSEs in particular. There is an increasingly widespread view – taken by figures including numerous former education secretaries, John Major and the Education Select Committee chair, Robert Halfon – that with education now mandatory until 18 there is no need for an additional high-stakes assessment at 16, and the costs that come with this.<sup>13</sup>

There is certainly some validity to this. GCSEs take a huge amount of time – near enough a full term and a half is lost to revision and taking the tests; they are expensive – schools spent £200m on GCSE entry fees last year alone.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps most seriously they dominate schools' thinking about curriculum all the way back to Year 7.

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\* They chose not to because that would have put their students at a disadvantage to those in the rest of the UK who received inflated school assessed grades.

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This is known as 'backwash' and the most visible manifestations are schools dropping subjects during Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) to focus on GCSE topics, and even starting the GCSE programme of study a year early. This undoubtedly impoverishes the curriculum offer.

Nevertheless, scrapping GCSEs without a replacement is not a viable option. Sixty-two percent of pupils in England do not attend a school after 16; there needs to be some kind of assessment to enable moves to other institutions given that they have different entry criteria.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, universities have no other external assessment information to use when making selection decisions (assuming AS-levels do not return), and young people who choose not to pursue academic qualifications after the age of 16 would have no certification in core subjects, which are typically required by employers. Finally, no assessment at 16 would mean there was no data at all on the half of secondary schools that are 11-16 only. Even if the sanctions on underperforming schools are deemed too aggressive, it would not be a good idea to have no ability to assess whether schools were fulfilling their responsibilities.

None of this means that there are not reforms that could retain the benefits of GCSEs while dealing with some of the critics valid complaints. One simple option would just be to reduce the number of exams. This could be done by cutting the number of examined subject to, for instance, a core of English, Maths and Science, leaving far more space in the curriculum for broader learning. This risks, though, the opposite effect, if schools chose to focus primarily on the assessed subjects. Another alternative would be to keep a broad base of subjects but only look for reliability at the level of the overall suite of subjects not each individual one. This is approach used for the French "Brevet" taken at 15 and allows for a much shorter set of exams.

There are plenty of other options that could be looked at, including more radical overhauls, but the key thing is not to make any decisions without considering the wider picture. We recommend the DfE should set up a review group to think through whether the ongoing disruption caused by covid is a good opportunity for wider reform and rebalancing of secondary assessment. This would need to look at the mix between the different purposes of assessment – validating the curriculum; holding schools accountable; certificating pupils and understanding how standards are changing nationally – and then proceed to design an assessment system that found the right balance. Without a proper review there is a risk that the system becomes so discredited that a future government ends up taking a knee-jerk decision to abolish GCSEs without proper analysis of the problems that would cause.

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## Conclusion

Schools and pupils have been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic. In the wider scheme of things the failure to run exams as normal for two years may seem relatively unimportant. But assessment is a critical function of any successful education system. It matters to pupils, whose future options are determined by it, and it matters to schools who are judged on their performance against it. Perhaps no government could have found a perfect solution to the problem of not being able to hold in-person exams but this government's refusal to make contingency plans after the first round of cancellations has left the system in a very difficult position.

In the short term, DfE and Ofqual will need to decide how to grade exams in 2022. Any choice will lead to unfairness to multiple cohorts of young people; that is the price for allowing unusually high grades in 2020 and 2021. In the longer term, they need to consider how to make England's exam system more resilient and whether this crisis has revealed more profound underlying problems with the way assessment works that requires a more substantive response. It will be difficult to restore the confidence in exams lost over the past two years. But doing so is essential to protect the long-term interests of young people.

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## About the author

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Sam is a senior fellow at the Institute for Government. He is also a senior adviser to the education charity Ark. Previously he was CEO of Education Partnerships Group, which supports governments in sub-Saharan Africa to develop education policy, and an executive director at Teach First. He worked at the Department for Education as a senior policy adviser to Michael Gove between 2010 and 2013.

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