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Guidance

Coronavirus (COVID-19): cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020

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1. Did exams need to be cancelled?

From Friday 20 March, all educational settings are closed to everyone except the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

The coronavirus outbreak is expected to continue having a significant impact on the education system, and the country, for months to come. Therefore exams have been cancelled now to give pupils, parents, and teachers certainty, and enable schools and colleges to focus on supporting vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

2. What will happen to those who have already done some non-exam assessment?

The calculated grade process will take into account a range of evidence including, for example, non-exam assessment and mock results, and the approach will be standardised between schools and colleges. Ofqual is working urgently with the exam boards to set out proposals for how this process will work and will be talking to teachers' representatives before finalising an approach, to ensure that the approach taken is as fair as possible.

3. How will you address the fact that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have their grades under-predicted?

We are not awarding students their predicted grades. Ofqual, the independent qualifications regulator, will develop a fair and robust process that takes into account a broad range of evidence, including teacher assessment and prior attainment. Ofqual will make every effort to ensure that the process agreed does not disadvantage any particular group of students.

Pupils who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance will have the opportunity to sit an exam, as soon as is reasonably possible after schools and colleges open again.

4. Will all students get their predicted grade?

No, we know that simply using predicted grades would not be fair to all students. The calculated grade will take into account teachers' assessment of the likely grade as well as other factors such as prior attainment, so students' final grades will not necessarily reflect their predicted grades.

5. Will schools be using mock exam results as a barometer for results – and is this fair on students as they did not know at the time these would be used as their final mark?

Mock exam results will be one of the pieces of evidence that will be taken into account in this process, alongside other factors. Ofqual will ensure schools are provided with clear guidance on how to do this fairly and robustly.

6. Will the past performance of the school be taken into account when devising the calculated grade?

Ofqual will consider carefully how to ensure the process is as fair as possible, which is likely to include considering measures that reflect how much progress a student would have been likely to have made at the school they are attending.

7. Is this an entirely new system?

Exam boards have experience of using moderated teacher assessment to award grades to a number of students, such as those who fall ill immediately before an exam. Ofqual will draw on this experience when developing the process to be used this year.

8. How will schools/colleges cope with the burden of putting on an atypical exam season?

We recognise that exams are a stressful time for schools and colleges. We will set out in due course the steps we will be taking to minimise this burden.

9. Will universities/colleges/sixth forms accept these calculated grades?

The calculated grades awarded will be formal grades, with the same status as grades awarded in any other year.

University representatives have already confirmed that they expect universities to be flexible and do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to higher education.

10. What if I am unhappy with my grade?

We will work closely with Ofqual and awarding organisations to ensure candidates are awarded a fair grade that recognises the work they have put in. If a student does not believe the correct process has been followed in their case they will be able to appeal on that basis. In addition, if they do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance, they will have the opportunity to sit an exam, as soon as is reasonably possible after schools and colleges open again. Students will also have the option to sit their exams in summer 2021.

11. Will there be an opportunity to take exams this year if a student is unhappy with their grade?

We recognise that some students may feel disappointed that they have not been able to sit their exams. If they do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance, they will have the opportunity to sit an exam, as soon as is reasonably possible after schools and colleges open again. Students will also have the option to sit their exams in summer 2021.

12. What about private candidates or home educated students?

We will work closely with the independent regulator of qualifications, Ofqual, to explore options for awarding grades to private candidates, including home educated students.

13. Can private centres run GCSEs/A levels if they chose to do so?

No. Exam boards will not be issuing papers for this summer's GCSE, AS and A levels so there will not be the opportunity to sit them at any centre.

14. Does this mean every exam in every module in every subject being cancelled, or will a limited number go ahead at GCSE and/or A level?

Exam boards will not be issuing papers for this summer's GCSE, AS and A levels so there will not be the opportunity to sit them in any subject.

15. What about vocational and technical qualifications?

No exams will be taking place in schools and colleges this summer.

There is a very wide range of different vocational and technical qualifications as well as other academic qualifications for which students were expecting to sit exams this summer. These are offered by a large number of awarding organisations, and have differing assessment approaches – in many cases students will already have completed modules or non-exam assessment which could provide evidence to award a grade. We are encouraging these organisations to show the maximum possible flexibility and pragmatism to ensure students are not disadvantaged. Ofqual is working urgently with the sector to explore options and we will work with them to provide more details shortly.

16. Will parents be required to educate their children while they are off school?

We are completely committed to ensuring that every child receives the best education possible and will be working with the BBC and others to provide resources for children to access while at home.

17. What if have started my coursework but it is not finished?

Exam boards will provide advice on this to schools and colleges as soon as possible.

18. What will young people with university offers do?

The grades awarded to students will have equal validity to the grades awarded in other years and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers. There is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted.

We welcome the constructive approach taken by the main university representative body, Universities UK, who have said that universities will be flexible and do all they can to support students and ensure they can progress to university.

19. Do universities need to start making unconditional offers / should I accept an unconditional offer now that exams are cancelled?

The grades awarded to students will have equal validity to the grades awarded in other years and should be treated in this way by universities, colleges and employers.

There is no reason for the usual admissions cycle to be disrupted. Universities should not begin making new unconditional offers and applicants should feel no pressure to accept such offers, as they will be awarded a formal calculated grade for each exam they would have taken.

20. If I already have an unconditional offer, does that remain?

Yes, an unconditional offer means you have already met the entry requirements, so the place is yours if you want it.

21. If I take the exam option, will I still be able to go to university this year?

Students who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their performance, will have the opportunity to sit an exam, as soon as is reasonably possible after the beginning of the academic year.

While it cannot be guaranteed in every circumstance, Universities UK has assured us that the majority of universities will show the utmost flexibility to ensure that such students who take this option are able to begin their course with a delayed start time.

If a student is in this circumstance, they should speak to the university from which they have an offer after receiving their calculated grade.

22. Are iGCSEs and the International Baccalaureate also cancelled?

We are making clear to all awarding organisations that no exams should go ahead in schools and colleges in England this year.

23. How will colleges, sixth-forms, universities cope with the fact that these students will have missed out on some of their education?

These are extraordinary circumstances. We are working with schools, sixth forms, colleges and universities to ensure that we do everything we can to best help students prepare for and progress to the next stage of their education.

24. Might the exams be reinstated if the coronavirus (COVID-19) is not as bad as expected?

No, the decision has been taken to cancel all exams this summer.