



Navigation menu

- [Topics](#)
- [Departments \(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations>\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations)
- [Government activity](#)

 

1. [Home \(<https://www.gov.uk/>\)](https://www.gov.uk/)
2. [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) \(<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon>\)](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon)
3. [Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus \(<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/education-and-childcare>\)](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/education-and-childcare)
4. [Closures, exams and managing a school or early years setting during coronavirus \(<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/closures-exams-managing-school>\)](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/closures-exams-managing-school)
5. [Proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022 \(<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-changes-to-the-assessment-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2022>\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-changes-to-the-assessment-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2022)

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Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-taxon/education-and-childcare>)

- [Department for Education \(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education)
- [Ofqual \(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual>\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofqual)

Consultation outcome

Decisions: proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2022

Updated 30 September 2021

Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Summary of decisions](#)

[Details](#)

[Equality Impact Assessment](#)

[Regulatory Impact Assessment](#)

[Print this page](#)



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Introduction

In 2020 and 2021 it was, regrettably, necessary to cancel national exams because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It is the government's policy that exams and assessments for GCSEs, AS and A levels (as well as for vocational and technical qualifications) should go ahead in summer 2022. We know that, all other things being equal, exams and other formal assessments are the best and fairest means of assessment. However, we recognise that students in the 2022 cohort have had their education disrupted, and that exams and assessments taken in summer 2022 should be adjusted to take this into account.

In considering our approach to exams and assessments in 2021 to 2022, we are being guided by the principles of fairness, flexibility, and certainty. As set out in the consultation document, we believe that the best way to ensure fairness is to run exams and other assessments, but with adjustments to the assessments themselves in some subjects and additional support to mitigate some of the pressure on teaching time and the pressure that students experience when revising for and sitting exams. We want to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in those arrangements to be able to respond to any further significant disruption to education over the coming year, whilst still enabling exams to go ahead. However, we also understand that students and teachers want as much certainty as possible early in the academic year and we therefore need to strike the right balance between early certainty and flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

As well as these guiding principles, the government's specific policy objectives with regard to exams and assessments next academic year are that:

- students can progress successfully to the next stage of their education or to employment
- every effort should be made to maintain the standard and rigour of the qualifications, to the extent this is possible, given the circumstances
- the subject content, specified by DfE, which forms the foundation of the qualifications should not be changed

On 12 July Ofqual and the Department for Education (DfE) published a joint consultation on assessment arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels in England in summer 2022 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-changes-to-the-assessment-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2022>). This proposed a range of adaptations to exams and assessments in light of the impact of the pandemic on students entering these qualifications in summer 2022. These proposals are in addition to the changes already agreed to the arrangements for non-exam assessment (NEA) and fieldwork (<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/arrangements-for-non-exam-assessment-for-qualifications-in-2022>).

The consultation closed on 1 August, by which time we had received 6,725 responses. A full summary and analysis of the responses has been published alongside this decision document.

Summary of decisions

As set out in our consultation, DfE is responsible for those decisions that relate to the scope of the subject content to be taught and assessed. Ofqual is responsible for those decisions that relate to the assessment of the subject content. This reflects the usual responsibilities the 2 organisations have. In particular, when these qualifications were introduced, DfE consulted on and put in place the subject content for all GCSE, AS and A level qualifications, and Ofqual took decisions about whether it could effectively regulate the content and, if so, put in place regulations for how it must be assessed.

In light of this and the broad support reflected in responses to the consultation, DfE has decided to implement the policy proposals about changes to the subject content set out in the consultation document. Ofqual has confirmed that it can effectively regulate assessment arrangements for GCSE, AS and A levels in summer 2022 in light of these decisions and will make changes to its regulations where appropriate.

In summary, these decisions mean that for summer 2022:

1. There will be optional topics and content in GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography. Ofqual will require exam boards to change how they assess these subjects to reflect the expected changes to the way the subject content is assessed, as proposed in the consultation.
2. Centres will be allowed to deliver practical work in GCSE biology, chemistry, physics, combined science, geology and astronomy, AS level biology, chemistry, physics and geology, and AS and A level environmental science by demonstration. We would encourage centres to continue to make available hands-on practical activities for their students wherever possible. This does not require changes to the assessment arrangements that the exam boards have in place for each of these specifications.
3. Centres will be allowed to assess the Common Practical Assessment Criteria (CPAC) across the minimum number of practical activities required to enable students to demonstrate their competence in A level biology, chemistry, physics and geology.
4. Exam boards can carry out remote monitoring of centres' application of the CPAC.
5. Students taking GCSE, AS and A level art and design will be assessed on their portfolio only.
6. Exam boards will provide advance information about the focus of the content of the exams for all GCSE, AS and A level subjects (except GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography) for the summer 2022 exams. The advance information will meet the principles set out in the consultation document.
7. The policy intention of providing advance information is that it will support students' revision. Therefore, the DfE has confirmed that advance information will be provided by 7 February 2022 at the latest. This will enable teachers to plan to adapt their teaching in the second half of the spring term if necessary. DfE has also decided to retain the flexibility for advance information to be deployed at other points ahead of 7 February 2022 if circumstances require. At least a week's notice will be given if it is decided that advance information will be released earlier than 7 February 2022.
8. Students will be given a formulae sheet for GCSE mathematics in summer 2022. Exam boards will provide copies of the formulae sheet for use in teaching and to ensure that students are familiar with it prior to the exams. Clean copies of the formulae sheet will be provided in the exams.
9. Students will be given a revised equation sheet for GCSE physics and combined science in summer 2022, covering all the equations required in the subject content. Exam boards will provide copies of the equation sheet for use in teaching and to ensure that students are familiar with it prior to the exams. Clean copies of the equation sheet will be provided in the exams.

These adjustments, along with the changes to non-exam assessment and fieldwork announced in June, are designed to mitigate the impacts of the disruption that students have faced during the pandemic without undermining the value of their qualifications and their ability to progress

successfully to further study. In addition, Ofqual is considering how best to grade qualifications next summer in a way that is as fair as possible to next year's cohort of students and also those who took exams in previous years or will take them in the future. We believe that, taken together, this package of measures will support teachers and students and enable exams to go ahead next year. These changes will apply to exams in 2022 and it is the intention that exams will go ahead as normal in 2023.

Advance information will also be provided for the November 2022 series of exams in GCSE English language and mathematics. This will be different advance information to the summer series, and will be released in July 2022, unless further disruption justifies earlier release. For the GCSE mathematics exams in November 2022 the same formulae sheets will be provided as for summer series exams.

Details

Changes to exam and assessment requirements

Changes to the arrangements for the assessment of GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography

We invited views in the consultation on the government's proposals that centres should have some choice of topics beyond a common core identified in each specification on which their students would answer questions for GCSE English literature, history and ancient history exams.

There was a high level of support for these proposals with disagreement from only 2% of respondents in English literature, 3% in history and 3% in ancient history. Respondents who agreed with the proposals said that they would help students to overcome disruption to their education due to the pandemic.

In addition, we invited views on the government's proposal that exam boards should provide a degree of content optionality in GCSE geography.

There was a high level of support for this proposal (83%). Although there was strong support for this proposal, some respondents were concerned that the order in which that content was taught varied across schools and colleges and so introducing this change would disadvantage students who have already been taught all of the content that it was proposed should become optional. Whilst we recognise that the impact of this change will not be the same across centres, we note the strong support overall for the proposal and believe that there will be benefit for all students, who will be required to revise and answer questions on less of the curriculum content than in a normal year. We also note that it is in students' best interests for the full curriculum to be covered wherever possible.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy that students should not be assessed on all topics and content in GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography, in line with the proposals. Ofqual has confirmed that it is able to regulate these changes to the assessment arrangements as detailed for each specification in the consultation document. Ofqual will change the Conditions and Requirements accordingly to require exam boards to set an assessment which allows different routes through.

Practical science work

We invited views in the consultation that for GCSE biology, chemistry, physics, combined science, geology, astronomy, AS biology, chemistry, physics and geology, and AS and A level environmental science teachers should be able to deliver practical science work by demonstration during the

academic year 2021 to 2022 (although of course they could also require students to complete all or some of the practical work themselves).

Many respondents supported this proposal (74%). While the proposal was supported for logistical reasons, some concern was expressed about the importance of students having hands-on experience of practical work for progression on to future study and to help them to answer the questions in the exams that assess practical skills. It is important to note that this proposal does not prevent centres from making hands-on practical activities available to their students wherever possible and we would encourage them to do so. There was also some concern that this proposal would not actually save a significant amount of teaching time and that covering the required content in these subjects was a more pressing issue.

We also invited views on a proposal to allow centres to assess the Common Practical Assessment Criteria (CPAC) in A level biology, chemistry, physics and geology across the minimum number of practical activities required for students to demonstrate their competence rather than students being required to complete at least 12 practical activities as required by the DfE subject content.

There was strong support for this proposal (73%) and only 10% of respondents disagreed. Respondents commented that it was a sensible response to public health concerns and potential impediments to access to specialist teaching rooms. However, respondents also said that a reduction in the number of practical activities needed to show competence for the Practical Endorsement might lead to students being less prepared to progress onto science courses in higher education. Again, it is important to note that this proposal does not prevent centres from making hands-on practical activities available to their students and we would encourage them to do so wherever possible.

We also invited views on a proposal to allow exam boards to monitor centres' application of the CPAC remotely.

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents supported this proposal, with many comments reflecting favourable views on remote monitoring but some saying it had been stressful and difficult when allowed in academic year 2020 to 2021.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy to permit the delivery of GCSE biology, chemistry, physics, combined science, geology, astronomy, AS biology, chemistry, physics and geology, and AS and A level environmental science practical science work by demonstration, in line with the proposals. DfE has also decided as a matter of policy to permit the assessment of the Common Practical Assessment Criteria (CPAC) in A level biology, chemistry, physics and geology across the minimum number of practical activities required for students to demonstrate their competence. Ofqual has confirmed that it is able to regulate these changes to the assessment arrangements. In addition, Ofqual will change the Conditions and Requirements to allow remote monitoring of centres' application of the CPAC.

Art and design qualifications

We invited views in the consultation on a proposal to allow the exam boards to remove (where applicable) the exam board set task in GCSE, AS and A level art and design.

Sixty-eight per cent of respondents supported this proposal. Comments included that assessment solely based on students' portfolio is fair considering the problems that some teachers and students have had accessing specialist rooms and equipment and may continue to have in the academic year 2021 to 2022.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy that students should not be assessed through an exam board set task, as in a normal year, because the problems with accessing specialist rooms and equipment arising from the pandemic might continue into the 2021 to 2022 academic year. Ofqual has decided

that GCSE, AS and A level art and design qualifications can validly be awarded in 2022 on the basis of a student's portfolio only. Ofqual has decided to change the Conditions and Requirements so that exam boards are required to award these qualifications on the basis of a portfolio only.

Advance information

We invited views on the proposal that the exam boards should provide advance information about the focus of the content of the exams in the majority of subjects at GCSE, AS and A level for the 2022 exams. We also invited views on the proposal that if there was to be some choice of topics or content in GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography, the exam boards should not provide advance information about the focus of the content of the exams.

There was a high level of support for the proposal to provide advance information (90%). The proposal not to provide advance information where a choice of topic or content was being provided was broadly supported (English literature - 56%, history – 51%, ancient history – 45% and geography – 49%) with 20-26% of respondents disagreeing across these subjects. It should be noted that for all these subjects, there was a high proportion of respondents who answered “neither agree nor disagree” - English literature - 19%, history – 25%, ancient history – 35% and geography – 25%.

Some respondents said that advance information should be provided in all subjects, including those where choice of topic or content may be introduced. Some respondents emphasised their view that additional support was particularly important in these subjects due to the content-heavy nature of the courses. We believe the rationale for not overlapping these adaptations remains strong, as this would disproportionately advantage students in these subjects compared to students taking subjects with only one adaptation.

We asked respondents to indicate any subjects for which advance information about the focus of the content of exams should not be given to students. At GCSE, AS and A level, mathematics was the most often referenced subject, with English language the second most referenced at GCSE and dance the second most referenced at AS or A level. Respondents frequently justified these choices on the basis that all of the content should remain the focus of study and assessment to enable successful progression onto further study. As GCSE, AS and A level art and design qualifications do not have assessment by exams, advance information is not needed.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy that advance information about the focus of the content of exams should be provided for all subjects at GCSE, AS and A level except GCSE English literature, history, ancient history and geography and GCSE, AS and A level art and design. Ofqual will change the Conditions and Requirements to allow the changes to the assessment arrangements.

The consultation document set out the government's intention that advance information is issued in the spring term to help students to focus their revision time. Should the impact of the pandemic worsen, it would be possible for the exam boards to issue advance information earlier in the academic year to help teachers focus their remaining teaching time. We therefore invited views on the proposal that there would be flexibility in the timing of the release of advance information in order to respond to the impact on education of any potential worsening of the pandemic.

82% of respondents supported the proposal to take a flexible approach to the timing of the release of advance information.

Whilst some respondents agreed with a flexible approach to the timing of the release, they nonetheless urged that advance information be released as soon as possible to help teachers to focus on the delivery of the required material for the exams. Were we to do so, all flexibility would be lost. Some respondents said that flexibility manifested itself as uncertainty and that this was stressful for teachers and students so it would be better to have published dates of when the advance

information will be released and when the policy will be reviewed. This has been taken on board in reaching our decisions in the context of the policy intention that the advance information should support students' revision.

Exam boards will provide centres with guidance about the approaches they will adopt when providing advance information. The advance information will meet the principles set out in the consultation document.

DfE has confirmed that the policy intention of the advance information is to support students' revision rather than a reduction in subject content, so its policy is that it should be released by 7 February 2022.

DfE has also decided to retain the flexibility to deploy advance information at other points ahead of 7 February 2022 if circumstances require. At least a week's notice will be given if it is decided that advance information will be released earlier than 7 February 2022.

Support materials

We invited views in the consultation on the proposal that GCSE mathematics students should be provided with a formulae sheet and that GCSE physics and combined science students should be provided with a revised equation sheet covering all the formulae and equations required in the Subject Content.

There was strong support for both proposals (81% in each case). Respondents commented that this would allow students to focus on understanding and application of the information rather than memorisation.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy, and in view of the disruption caused by the pandemic, that it is not necessary for students to memorise formulae for GCSE maths and equations for GCSE physics and combined science, as they must in a normal year. In light of that policy decision, Ofqual has decided to amend the Conditions and Requirements to require exam boards to provide a formulae sheet in the exams for GCSE mathematics and a revised equation sheet in the exams for GCSE physics and combined science. Exam boards will provide copies of the formulae and equation sheets for use in teaching and to ensure that students are familiar with them prior to the exams. Clean copies of the formulae and equation sheets will be provided in the exams.

November 2022 exam series

Although it was not raised explicitly in the consultation document, stakeholders have also raised the question of whether the adaptations that apply to the summer 2022 exam series will also apply to the November 2022 series for English language and mathematics GCSE. We have considered this and believe that it would be fair to provide equivalent adaptations for students sitting exams in the November series. Many of these students will be the same cohort who sat the summer 2022 exams and so will have experienced the same level of disruption to their education. We believe it is right in these circumstances to treat the November series as though it was an extension of the summer series.

Students frequently move institution between the summer and November exam series and in many cases they are therefore entered for November exams with a different exam board to the one with which they sat their summer exam. In order to be fair to all students, and also to avoid November exams being too predictable, we believe it is appropriate that the advance information provided for November exams should be different to that provided for the summer exams.

DfE has decided as a matter of policy that advance information will be provided for the November 2022 series of exams in GCSE English language and mathematics. This will be different advance information to the summer series, and will be released in July 2022, unless further disruption justifies earlier release. DfE has also decided as a matter of policy that for the GCSE mathematics exams in November 2022 the same formulae sheets will be provided as for summer series exams. Ofqual will change the Conditions and Requirements to allow the changes to the assessment arrangements.

Equality Impact Assessment

We assessed the potential impact of the proposals on students who share different protected characteristics before we consulted. We set this out in the Equality Impact Assessment included in the consultation document and invited views on this. In proposing changes to the exams and assessments for 2022, we have sought to guard against proposing changes that would further advantage students whose education has been less disrupted than that of others. However, changes to exams and other assessments cannot address the differential impact on students of the disruption as any changes must apply equally to all students taking the assessment.

The vast majority of respondents believed that there were no impacts beyond those we identified in the consultation. Only 18% of respondents chose to comment further on any other potential equality impacts. The most common responses focused on the negative impact of COVID-19 on students' mental health or wellbeing. Other concerns were raised which were not related to the proposals in the consultation, for example, that teacher assessment should be used in 2022.

It should be noted that the exam boards and centres will, as normal, be required to meet the obligations of the Equality Act 2010 to provide reasonable adjustments for disabled students.

While we understand the range of concerns raised, if there are to continue to be national qualifications assessed to a common standard, it has not been possible to identify mitigations within the qualifications that would reduce the disadvantage caused to particular groups by the pandemic. The government has put in place a comprehensive education recovery package which allows school and college leaders the flexibility to support those students most in need, including the most disadvantaged.

Regulatory Impact Assessment

We sought views in the consultation on our initial regulatory impact assessment. Only 12% of respondents chose to comment further on any other potential regulatory impacts. Again, we received a rich range of responses that are summarised in the analysis document. The most common responses covered issues that were out of scope for this consultation, for example, whether there has been full consideration of the cost burden on teachers in terms of workload and stress if teacher assessed grades are used in 2022. However, the cost to schools of extra resources such as formulae sheets was raised. These will be provided by the exam boards at no cost to centres.

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