

DfE and Ofqual consultation on how GCSE, AS and A level grades should be awarded in summer 2021

A response from the Special Educational Consortium

The Special Educational Consortium (SEC) is a membership organisation that comes together to protect and promote the rights of disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN). Our membership includes the voluntary and community sector, education providers and professional associations. SEC believes that every child and young person is entitled to an education that allows them to fulfil their potential and achieve their aspirations.

SEC identifies areas of consensus across our membership and works with the Department for Education, Parliament, and other decision-makers when there are proposals for changes in policy, legislation, regulations and guidance that may affect disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Our membership includes nationally recognised experts on issues including assessment and curriculum, schools and high needs funding, the SEN legal framework, exclusions and alternative provision.

SEC recognizes the importance of grades awarded to students in 2021 reflecting the standard at which they are performing. Our response to the consultation identifies some general concerns about how the awarding process will work for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Specialist organisations who are part of SEC are responding to the consultation on the details for students with a particular type of need or impairment; the SEC response identifies concerns across areas of need and impairment.

Our over-riding concern is that disabled students and students with special educational needs have been at a significant disadvantage during the pandemic: some students have not received the provision that they rely on to support their learning; some have been without therapies to keep them fit, healthy and pain-free; some have not had work adapted to meet their needs. The

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assessment of learning and the awarding of grades cannot compensate for this loss of learning, but need to be cast in such a way that students are able to demonstrate, through all the means available, what they know, understand and can do.

Reasonable adjustments and access arrangements

A key priority for SEC is that, for all students who require them, the necessary reasonable adjustments are in place for any assessment task that is used to inform the awarding of grades. No student should be placed at a disadvantage because a piece of work used in the assessment process was completed without those adjustments being in place.

With a different process from that which normally applies, it is vital that there are reminders for all parties about the need for access arrangements and reasonable adjustments to be in place. These considerations need to be taken into account in any of the arrangements associated with the award of grades, including:

- the design of assessment papers by the exam boards
- the conditions under which any assessment is conducted, including the timing, period of time, the location of and support for any assessment
- the development of support materials for teachers
- schools' internal quality assurance processes

Timing of final assessments

SEC agrees that awards should be determined late on in the year, to leave the maximum amount of time for teaching and learning, but without compromising the awarding of grades. The proposed timing, with teachers making final assessments of their students' performance during late May and early June, strikes the right balance.

Selection of evidence for assessment

Assessment papers developed by the exam boards should not be the only source of evidence that is acceptable. There should be no requirement to use any or all of the assessment papers, rather they should be available to supplement and complement other work that can be used as evidence for grade assessment.

It is important that any pupil who misses an assessment opportunity is not disadvantaged and that evidence from a range of work can inform the award of grades. Grades should be awarded on the basis of the best evidence of student performance and it should be possible to draw this evidence from across the period during which any particular course has been taught.

Particularly where there are significant gaps in a student's educational experience, it may be necessary to base grade awards on the evidence of performance in a smaller sample of work than might be expected for the majority of students. Where there is a smaller sample of work available, criteria should be applied rigorously, supported by the proper quality assurance mechanisms, but the size of the sample of work should not translate into a requirement on an individual pupil to take an exam board assessment.

Private candidates

Many students are being home educated because of difficulties that have arisen in a school setting. Recognising this, it would be helpful if private candidates had a choice of how they were assessed. Most crucially, if they had to identify a school where they were to be assessed, it would be essential that they had a choice of venue, so that students with a poor experience of school were not sent back to a school where they had experienced those difficulties.

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