

Consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the 2021 exams should not include more optional questions than usual?

This response has been determined with regard to the specific short term proposals; however we would welcome a strategic, longer term approach to managing the effects of potential further pandemics and disruptive events.

In terms of the 2021 exam series, there are clear pros and cons of the use of optional questions that need to be considered in addressing the needs of students of varying abilities and backgrounds.

Under normal circumstances, at GCSE the use of optional questions would disadvantage students with poor confidence, poor literacy skills or those lacking powers of concentration. It would further amplify the attainment gap between lower and higher achieving students.

At AS and A level the negative impact on student performance would be less but would still require teachers to make significant changes to their curriculum planning and examination preparation for classes.

Teachers benefit from stability in the system and making changes in examination requirements at this stage could be disruptive.

In addition, whilst it is attractive to consider a reduction in examinable content for the sciences at GCSE, AS and A level, at this stage of the 2021 examination cycle there may be difficulties in determining appropriate content as non-examinable without impacting on the expectations of what students should have learned for a full and rounded science education, and their ability to progress effectively to their next stage of education, training or employment.

These arguments would suggest that the 2021 exams should not include more optional questions than usual. However, this also needs to be balanced against the fact that, under the current circumstances, where students may not have been taught significant amounts of examinable content, they will be at a clear disadvantage where required to answer questions on these topics and this disadvantage is likely to be more profound for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In making the decision on whether to use optional questions, Ofqual therefore needs to consider the likely extent of content not having been covered by schools and colleges and how this may differ between centres. A possible way forward would be for the choice of optional questions (topics rather than specific questions) to be determined in advance at centre level. This would avoid students having to pick between optional questions themselves, while also reducing the risk of them being faced with compulsory questions on topics they have not been taught.

The numbering of the following questions depends on which subjects have been ticked. The following questions 14-18 apply to subjects with GCSE / AS / A level OTHER than GCSE ancient history, GCSE history and GCSE geography.

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for each GCSE subject in 2021?

The proposed arrangements represent a practical and sensible solution to both the problems of lack of teacher contact for students in recent weeks, and the anticipated problems associated with students working in science laboratories on return to school. Problems associated with small group work and handling of equipment by students will make normal practical science lessons unmanageable in some settings in the immediate future. The proposed change to allow observation of demonstrations of practical techniques is a workable and effective compromise, as long as schools will be encouraged to return to normal practice as soon as practicable. It must be made clear that any changes to the requirements concerning the apparatus and techniques component of the course are only temporary, and that both DfE and Ofqual continue to emphasise their commitment to assessed practical science.

3. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for each GCSE subject in 2021?

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed assessment arrangements for each AS and A level subject in 2021?

In the majority of settings, the numbers of students in AS and A level classes will allow students to work safely whilst conducting practical science activities. There will however be additional time required for the preparation and clearing up of such activities to minimise risks of contamination and infection. The proposal to retain CPAC requirements, whilst allowing teachers more flexibility in the number of practical activities undertaken is a welcome compromise in the circumstances and will be regarded as a helpful and practical solution by teachers.

In settings such as sixth form colleges where science classes at A level can be large, and where normal practical science activities will be more difficult to manage, giving teachers the flexibility to adapt to their own circumstances will be welcomed. The proposals do give teachers that flexibility, and this is to be welcomed.

Examination boards should be encouraged to increase the monitoring of CPAC, either by remote or direct methods, as schools and colleges will need additional support and to share good practice in the short term.

5. Do you have any comments on the proposed assessment arrangements for each GCE AS and A level subject in 2021?

If answering for one subject with GCSE / AS / A level, the numbers for the questions following the subject questions will be:

20. Are there other potential equality impacts that we have not explored? What are they?

In the sciences, some centres are suffering from a lack of specialist science teachers. These centres tend to be in areas of student deprivation. Stability in the system and clarity of messages are particularly important in such circumstances as inexperienced teachers are likely to find change unsettling.

Science laboratory technicians will be required to undertake additional duties and to shoulder additional responsibility for their own well-being and that of others. School leaders need to be informed of the importance of technicians in implementing the curriculum, at a time when some school leaders are responding to perceived reduction in practical work as a potential saving and making technicians redundant.

21. We would welcome your views on how any potential negative impacts on particular groups of students could be mitigated.

It is widely recognised that disadvantaged students are further disadvantaged by extended breaks from school. With the likelihood of further local, if not wider scale, lockdowns in the coming academic year, these students will be further disadvantaged. Learning from the 2020 examination experiences, we ask that teacher moderated assessment and centre assessment grades are considered for all students and centres which are affected by extended lockdown periods.

22. Are there additional activities associated with changing the exam and assessment arrangements for students taking the qualifications in summer 2021 that we have not identified above? What are they?

Continued guidance so that there is absolute clarity on any proposed changes and how they should be implemented from DfE and Ofqual. A flexible approach needs to be taken which reflects the changing nature of the pandemic and its impact.

Guidance for science leaders and their teams which support planning for effective science learning with reduced options for practical work. As an example, for a specific technique in science there may be an option of watching the technique performed by video, engaging individual students in manipulating a simulation of the technique or interacting with a teacher who is performing a demonstration of the technique, each of which will have different learning outcomes. Advice and evidence of the impact of these options needs to be shared across schools and colleges. The Association is well placed to play a leading role to provide such teacher support and guidance, and would draw on evidence, for instance, from the Assessing Practical Skills through Written Examination Questions project (University of York Science Education Group and King's College London, CRESTEM group funded by Wellcome-Gatsby).

23. What additional costs do you expect you would incur if the proposed changes to the exam and assessment arrangements were introduced for summer 2021?

At GCSE the effective use of teacher demonstrations could reduce the cost of consumables in the laboratory but may need to be offset against the provision of visualiser technology to enable all students to see the demonstration without moving from their seats.

24. We would welcome your views on any suggestions for alternative approaches that could reduce burden and costs.

Work with subject associations to help communicate changes in regulations, and associated good practice to subject teachers.