

Ofqual consultation: use of advanced information and support materials in summer 2021 general qualifications

Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

A. Introduction

1. The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents over 20,000 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.

B. General comments

2. While we broadly agree with the proposals to release information on which topics will or will not appear in GCSE, AS and A-level exams, and the use of exam aids in some subjects, we do not believe that these changes alone will adequately address the differential learning loss of candidates next summer.

3. Learning loss has not been uniform across regions, within centres, and between individual candidates. Some candidates next summer will have received significantly less classroom teaching than others, as a result of the pandemic, and through no fault of themselves or their schools. While pre-release of information allows students and their teachers to focus their learning revision in the final months, as it is provided to all candidates equally, it does not address this issue of fairness.

4. ASCL, along with other unions and professional associations, has continually suggested greater optionality at a paper or topic level, as a way to mitigate for differential lost learning. The principle of this is that candidates are assessed on content for which they have studied, thus allowing them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the exams. Optionality at a topic level has already been confirmed for GCSE English literature and history. ASCL does not believe that Ofqual has yet made a compelling argument to either the sector or the wider public as to why this cannot happen in more qualifications.

5. We do not believe that the proposed changes alone will carry public confidence in the fairness of the 2021 exams.

6. We broadly agree with the three principles identified for the use of advanced information and support materials, although with important caveats:

The advance information should not be so detailed that students will be able to memorise answers to write down in the exam.

7. The validity of the disciplinary assessment must be retained, and therefore it is important that candidates are not able to memorise and rehearse an exam answer. This would not only

undermine the validity of the assessment, but also give candidates who find memorisation easier an unfair advantage.

8. It is therefore likely that the pre-release of information will be different in different subjects, depending on the design of the assessment. As much as possible there should be a consistency of approach across qualifications, and consistency in the level of detail released between different awarding organisations.

The advance information should not be so extensive or specific that it will damage students' successful progression to a higher level qualification in the subject.

9. It is important that students are able to progress successfully onto their next stage of education. However, the purpose behind these proposed changes is to allow students to focus their learning and revision on content that they know will be assessed; in response to the significant loss of learning since March. This will inevitably mean that some areas of the course are covered in less depth than usual, and that students may have a less secure understanding of this content than in normal years.

10. Ofqual and the awarding organisations should work with post-16 providers and higher education providers to identify which areas of the specification students may be less secure in, so that providers can adapt their curricula accordingly for the 2021 autumn term.

It should still be possible to differentiate between students on the basis of their performance.

11. The summer exam series should continue to differentiate between candidates based on their performance, especially in relation to the pre-release of content and exam aids. However, the current proposals do not adequately address differential learning loss.

12. Greater optionality and regional grading have been ruled out by both Ofqual and the Department for Education.

13. The DfE is convening an independent expert group to make recommendations on how to mitigate for differential learning loss. It is important that the scope and remit of the group is broad enough to allow for exploration of further changes to the design of assessments and the awarding of grades; including how use of advanced information and support materials might be adapted to make the exams fairer.

Subject specific differences

14. ASCL has not commented on which subjects pre-release of content should be given in. Our view is that this must be determined by experts in each subject. As a broad principle, the disciplinary nature of assessment in each subject must be maintained; while ensuring individual candidates are not disadvantaged by their choice of subjects, especially for AS and A-levels.

Exam aids

15. Likewise, ASCL has not commented on which subjects exam aids should be used in. Our view is that this must be determined by experts in each subject. As a general principle, exam aids are likely to be most effective when they mean students do not have to memorise

key information. This might include formulas and equations in STEM subjects; and key dates, quotations and technical terms in humanities and arts subjects.

16. The exam aids should be released as early as possible, by the end of January at the latest, for schools and colleges to use with their students during the final months of teaching and revision.

C. With regard to your specific questions

Question: Are you in favour of students taking GCSE, AS, A level exams in 2021 being told in advance some of the topics on which exam questions will or will not focus?

17. Yes.

Question: To what extent do you agree that the information shared in advance should help students to focus their revision?

18. Strongly agree.

Question: To what extent do you agree that the information shared in advance should not be so detailed that students will be able to memorise answers to write down in the exam?

19. Strongly agree.

Question: To what extent do you agree that the information shared in advance should not be so extensive that students' revision will be so narrow they will not be able to progress successfully to a higher level qualification in the subject?

20. Disagree. The advanced information will inevitably mean that students, especially those that have experienced significant learning loss, are less secure in some areas of the course that are not assessed, than they would have been normally. These students should still be able to progress in this subject, and post-16 providers and HEIs should address this through the design of the 2021 curricula and beyond.

Question: To what extent do you agree that the information shared in advance should not stop the qualification from differentiating between students on the basis of their performance in the exam?

21. Neither agree nor disagree. It is not possible to answer this question in the abstract. The DfE expert group looking at differential loss learning must be able to explore all aspects of next summer's qualifications.

Question: Are you in favour of students taking GCSE, AS or A level exams in 2021 having access to support materials in some subjects?

22. Yes.

Question: Do you think the provision of advance information could disadvantage any students because they share a protected characteristic?

23. No.

Question: Do you think the provision of support materials in exams could disadvantage any students because they share a protected characteristic?

24. No.

25. *NB – ASCL has not responded to individual subject questions, for the reasons outlined above.

D. Conclusion

26. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

27. We hope that this response is of value to the process. ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Tom Middlehurst
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