

The issues faced in delivering an autumn examination series

The decision to cancel the May/June 2020 exam series will not only impact upon centres and students this summer, but the ramifications of this decision will be felt well into the 2020/2021 academic year. Credit must be given to Ofqual and the JCQ awarding bodies for navigating a course through the array of issues to ensure that students are awarded a grade in the fairest way possible this summer. However, there is still some way to go before it can be confidently stated that the challenges presented this summer have been successfully overcome.

Beyond the submission of centre assessment grades, the application of a statistical model, the issuing of results, and the management of student appeals over their grade(s), the JCQ and its member awarding bodies will be tasked with arranging an additional GCSE, AS and A level exam series in autumn 2020.

In late March, when announcing the closure of schools and the cancelling of the summer exam series, the Department for Education (DfE) confirmed that 'pupils who do not feel their calculated grade reflects their ability will have the opportunity to sit an exam as soon as is reasonably possible in the autumn'. Consequently, Ofqual have now turned their attention to this additional autumn exam series by launching a consultation (ending on 8 June) asking for feedback on the following areas:

- The scope of the exam series
- How subjects with non-examination assessments will be managed
- Arrangements for particular subjects/qualifications with specific assessment requirements (including GCSE, AS and A level art and design, A level biology, chemistry, physics and geology, and GCSE English language, Extended Project Qualifications and the Advanced Extension Award in maths)
- The timing of the exam series
- The process for reviews and appeals
- The issuing of certificates

The scope of the autumn exam series

There are some significant decisions which need to be made regarding the scope of the autumn exam series, including:

- Should all exams be offered as they were for the summer exam series?
- Should awarding bodies be permitted to withdraw exams for a qualification which received no entries?
- Should the exams offered in the autumn be in the same format as those which would have been offered in summer 2020?
- Should the same number of exams be taken by students as they would have taken if the summer exams had not been cancelled?

Whatever decisions are made following the consultation, there must be equality for all students across all subjects and qualifications. Although there is an understanding and acceptance that greater emphasis is placed upon subjects such as maths and English, they should not be prioritised at the expense of students who may, for example, want to sit an examination in a less taught language such as Turkish, Portuguese, Gujarati or Biblical Hebrew.

With regard to which subjects and qualifications should be offered in the autumn, it is worth considering, once again, the message given to students by the DfE when the decision to cancel the summer exam series was made - that if they felt that their calculated grade does not reflect their ability then they '...will have the opportunity to sit an exam as soon as is reasonably possible in the autumn'. Therefore, there seems to be no option but to offer all exams as they were offered during the aborted summer exams series.

Specific subjects, qualifications, and types of assessment

One of the challenges with arranging a 'standalone' exam series, such as the proposed autumn exam series, is that not all subjects are assessed via a written timetabled examination – and some far-reaching decisions will need to be made in relation to these subjects and qualifications.

If subjects with non-examination assessments (NEAs) are included within an autumn exam series, then arrangements will need to be made to allow students to complete these NEAs. If the NEA element is to be removed, then an award will have to be made based solely upon performances in the written exams. This is problematic as NEAs are included in some subjects for very specific academic reasons, and the omission of the NEA component may be viewed as 'devaluing' the final grade.

Issues will need to be addressed in subjects where the assessment is not completed as a written timetabled examination. This includes art and design, where tasks are completed under supervised conditions, and A level biology, chemistry, physics and/or geology where practical skills are assessed. There will also need to be consideration given to GCSE English language and whether exam boards should carry forward the outcome of the GCSE English language spoken language assessment.

A decision will also have to be made on whether qualifications such as the Advanced Extension Award in maths and Extended Project Qualifications are made available to students during the autumn exam series.

The timing of the autumn exam series

One of the major challenges in hosting an autumn exam series is deciding when this will take place.

In reality, the options are limited. There is currently a very short exam series scheduled for 2-11 November, and although this could be extended, the issue is that an exam series which includes the scheduling of all GCSE, AS and A level examinations would take approximately 6 weeks to complete. As well as the logistical issues faced by centres having to host such a lengthy exams

series throughout the second half of the autumn term. this would also impact upon the issuing of results, which wouldn't take place until February – at the earliest.

Possible solutions are to host AS and A level exams in October – although a half term over 2 weeks in late October must be considered, as well as the impact upon exams officers employed on term-time only contracts – and GCSE exams in November. These timelines would enable an AS and A level results day in late December and a GCSE results day in February. The latter may come at a time when exams officers are engaged in submitting summer exam entries.

Regardless of when the autumn exam series is held, centres will face several significant challenges, including:

- Recruiting – and possibly training - invigilators
- Acquiring suitable accommodation for the staging of examinations
- The cost of a potentially sizeable, and unexpected, exam series
- Disruption to internal/mock exams which may be planned for November
- The risk of malpractice/maladministration if an exams officer has been newly appointed at the start of term

Awarding bodies may also have difficulties in recruiting examiners – particularly if these are teachers with limited capacity at the end of the autumn term/start of spring term when they may also be marking mock examinations, or having to mark scripts over their Christmas break.

Post-exam issues

Once the autumn exam series is completed, the work for exams officers and teachers does not end with the completion of the final timetabled examination.

If a decision is made to apply normal arrangements for the review of marking and appeals to the autumn exam series, then this will extend the timeline before final grades are confirmed whilst also adding to the workload of exams officers and teaching staff.

As students will have been issued with a calculated grade in the summer, and as both results will stand if a student takes exams in the autumn series, a decision will also have to be made over whether awarding bodies will issue a replacement certificate to show either the calculated grade or the grade from the autumn exam series (whichever is the higher).

The challenges in delivering an autumn exam series are significant. As well as the issues listed above, the following will need to be considered:

- support for new exams officers in meeting the challenges of an autumn exam series
- allowing time to plan for an autumn exam series – preparations may need to start in early September
- submitting entries - DfE guidance states that 'the centre which entered them in the summer should be responsible for entering them for those exams.'
- which centre submits entries on behalf of students (where they would have sat their summer exams or their new centre if they have moved centres)

- who pays for exam entries (centre(s) or students)
- where the exams will take place (the original centre, the new centre, or are 'local hubs' identified where all candidates can sit their exams)?
- when will candidates 're-sit' GCSE maths and English exams if they fail to achieve a Grade 4 in the autumn exam series?

Although key stakeholders such as *The Exams Office*, the JCQ, and its' members awarding bodies will need to provide advice and guidance to centres to ensure that any administrative errors are avoided during the autumn series, there will also be a responsibility upon heads of centres and senior leaders in supporting their exams officer to ensure that the autumn series is successfully delivered within every centre.

To ensure that the views of the exams officer community are taken into account, *The Exams Office* encourages staff involved in exams across all of our 4000+ centre members to participate in [Ofqual's consultation on an additional GCSE, AS and A level exam series in autumn 2020](#).