

**Education Committee**  
**Exams 2021**  
**08 December 2020**

*Session I*

**Witnesses**

- Dame Glenys Stacey, Acting Chief Regulator, Ofqual

*Session II*

**Witnesses**

- Rt Hon. Nick Gibb MP, Minister for School Standards, Department for Education

**Overview**

The Education Committee heard evidence on the Department of Education and Ofqual's response to Covid-19 and scrutinised the measures established to mitigate the loss of education experienced by school pupils as a consequence of the pandemic. Moreover, the committee questioned the decision by the department and by Ofqual to peg 2021 exam results to the 2020 results.

*Session I*

**Grade Inflation**

The session was opened the Chair, Robert Halfon MP (Con, Harlow) who asked whether Dame Glenys Stacey, acting Chief Regulator, Ofqual, agreed that grade inflation across the board was ineffective in addressing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Dame Glenys answered that it was difficult to judge what the right answer would be for examinations in 2021, given the complex and troubling impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and attainment. Moreover, Dame Glenys continued, it would be unconscionable to return to pre-Covid-19 processes in 2021, as those pupils had also been impacted by the pandemic and should be considered as part of the same cohort as pupils taking exams in 2020.

Dame Glenys added that examinations were unable to close the disadvantage gap in themselves. However, the package of measures being presented for 2021 would benefit the least prepared students, which were often the most disadvantaged.

Grade inflation in 2020 had been unintended, the Chair then stated, and was the result of a significant error in the way that 2020 grades were assessed. As such, why didn't Ofqual peg 2021 results to those in 2019, with adjustment for overall performance due to disruptions, rather than repeating the mistake.

Dame Glenys replied that it would be difficult to return to normality in examination processes for the moment, as pupils were still experiencing the effects of Covid-19 on their education, and would likely continue to feel those effects up to 2022. Moreover, Dame Glenys rejected the notion that pegging results in 2021 to the results in 2020 would create unfair and gross grade inflation. Such an outcome would be mitigated by not allowing implausible grade boundaries, she added, before noting that a consultation by Ofqual evidenced that the majority of stakeholders, including parents, did not see pegging the 2021 results to 2020 results as fair or reasonable.

The Chair questioned whether employers and businesses had been included in the consultation, to which Dame Glenys responded that CBI had been part of the consultation, while other industry groups and organisations had also been spoken to. She then agreed to write to the committee with further details.

### **Marking & Exam Boards**

Jonathan Gullis MP (Con, Stoke-on-Trent North) then inquired as to how Ofqual were going to ensure that marking was fair across all exam boards and prevent the system being overloaded with appeals.

There were regular controls over marking, and quality controls within exam boards, Dame Glenys answered. However, she recognised that the timeframe for marking in 2021 would be reduced and advised that the solution would be for exam boards to hire additional staff.

Ian Mearns MP (Lab, Gateshead) asked how the most disadvantaged pupils would benefit from the new measures being introduced for marking exams in 2021, to which Dame Glenys responded that considerable work was undertaken to ensure that disadvantage was not exacerbated through examinations. For example, she said, questions were written to be understandable and without bias.

In relation to the changes for examination of 2021, Dame Glenys continued, measures such as early notification allowed disadvantaged pupils more time to prepare. However, she reiterated that examinations and qualifications could not address disadvantage in themselves.

Dr Caroline Johnson MP (Con, Sleaford and North Hykeham) noted that some pupils' education had been more disrupted than others and asked whether it was possible to include a box on an exam paper for how many days the pupil had missed. That would provide data on whether disrupted learning created a statistically significant effect, she suggested.

Dame Glenys answered that Ofqual had suggested to Government that one way to recognise differential lost learning would be for teachers to make evaluations. However, that information should not be contained on certificates, she continued, while there remained debate as to what information should be included in those evaluations. Moreover, importing such data into grading would distort grades and undermine the purpose of qualifications, Dame Glenys averred.

Mearns then questioned what would happen if a large cohort of pupils were unable to sit crucial exams in 2021, beyond the numbers currently anticipated for by the Department for Education.

That prospect was becoming vanishingly small, Dame Glenys answered, as a result of the mitigation measures being put in place. Validated teacher assessments could be utilised, as well as contingency papers, in the likely only few cases wherein a pupil could not take their exams, she advised. That arrangement could be strained however, Dame Glenys continued, if there was a large-scale issue and as such Ofqual was in discussions with the department to consider alternative contingencies.

### **Catch-Up Learning**

David Johnston MP (Con, Wantage) asked whether Ofqual had a view on the use of holiday periods to provide additional learning to which Dame Glenys responded that it was not for Ofqual to advise schools on how and when to conduct teaching. However, catch-up learning was essential to address the loss of learning that arose from the pandemic, she added, and was therefore strongly encouraged.

Kim Johnson MP (Lab, Liverpool, Riverside) asked whether there was research being conducted into lost learning to which Dame Glenys replied that there was. She stated that Ofqual were collating and synthesising a wide range of data from a wide range of sources to understand the issue in granular detail not only by region but also locality.

A lost learning working group was also being established by ministers, Dame Glenys continued, though she was unable to confirm whether that would be pandemic specific or have broader investigative parameters.

### **Ofqual**

Fleur Anderson MP (Lab, Putney) asked whether there had been any sense of insufficient independence for Ofqual as a regulator.

Not at all, Dame Glenys replied, before noting that she had been an independent public servant for many years in many roles and therefore was able to answer with confidence.

C. Johnson then asked how Ofqual's decision for grading in 2021 would be fair on pupils taking exams in 2022, to which Dame Glenys responded that those pupils would hopefully have a better learning experience than those of 2021. However, the matter would remain under review and a position would be reached next year, she stated.

### *Session II*

### **Department for Education**

The session was opened by the Chair who noted that the Secretary of State for Education, and the Minister for School Standards, had committed to providing the committee with departmental documents pertaining to the school examinations matter and questioned why those documents had not yet been provided.

Rt Hon. Nick Gibb MP, Minister for School Standards, answered that the department intended to be as open and transparent as possible, and had offered to provide summaries of the various meetings that had taken place over the summer and were relevant to the committee's inquiry. The difficulty with providing further internal documentation however, Gibbs continued, related to the privacy of civil servants and the principles of how the civil service operated.

Mearns then raised concerns that the department appeared to be hiding issues that they did not want the committee to know about, which Gibb rejected. He reiterated that the civil service operated on principles that had to be protected and that within those constraints the department would seek to meet the committee's requests.

### **Grade Inflation**

The Chair asked whether the minister agreed that grade inflation across the board was ineffective in addressing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

Gibb responded that he concurred with Dame Glenys' position. The measure would help the least prepared and those that had suffered the most disruption, he continued, though it was not the main measure the department was using to address disadvantage. Moreover, Gibb advised the committee,

the 2020 and 2021 groups had to be considered as a single cohort that had been disadvantaged by a loss of learning resulting from the pandemic.

The Chair subsequently inquired as to why the 2021 examinations could not be pegged to 2019, with adjusted grade boundaries, to which Gibb replied that such a measure would be considered as unfair, given the amount of disruption experienced by the 2021 cohort of students.

### **Expert Advisory Group**

The Chair asked when the expert advisory group on differential learning would be set up by the department to investigate the impact of the pandemic on education, to which Gibb responded that work to establish the group was being conducted currently and that it was due to report to the Government in the Spring of 2021.

Was the work of that group likely to be published, the Chair then questioned.

Gibb replied that the group was being set up to advise the Secretary of State and therefore it was not appropriate to publish its discussions. However, any decisions made by the group would be published, he said.

Wakeford then questioned whether reporting in the Spring of 2021 would be too late, to which Gibb replied that the advisory group would continue to monitor the situation throughout 2021 so that the department could respond in the most effective way. However, the major decisions that had to be taken had already been taken, he added.

### **Regional Disparities**

Christian Wakeford MP (Con, Bury South) asked whether there was any work being conducted by the department to address regional disparities in terms of the impacts of the pandemic.

The issue that different individual pupils in different areas might have experienced various levels of disruption was a significant concern, Gibb replied. That had been explored and adjustments to the grading systems had been considered, he stated. However, such adjustments brought their own inequities and unfairness, he advised the committee.

Was the department sharing regional attendance statistics with Ofqual, Wakeford subsequently questioned, to which Gibb responded that detailed attendance figures by region would be published before the end of December. However, he advised the committee that attendance by year groups was not collected.

Tom Hunt MP (Con, Ipswich) asked whether the department had considered ensuring that pupils covered all aspects of core subjects, such as English, Maths and Science, and whether students could not be examined in alternative subjects, or if they'd considered not applying the new measures in regions which had little disruption due to the pandemic.

Gibb answered that holding exams remained the fairest way for students to demonstrate their knowledge, though disruption had to be accounted for, even in schools with excellent remote provision or minimal closures. In relation to narrowing the curriculum, Gibb then told the committee, the idea had been considered and immediately rejected as it was vital for pupils to have a broad education.

## Digital Divide & Remote Learning

Mearns asked how Ofsted's role could be strengthened to ensure that children were learning whether in school or remotely from home.

Gibb replied that the department was spending over £200m to ensure that children, particularly the vulnerable and disadvantaged, had access to technologies that facilitated home-learning. That policy had been phenomenally successful, he added.

Anderson asked whether the department had a list of the highest risk schools, or those that needed further assistance to provide pupils with laptops or data, so that it could proactively address problems that might arise in the summer of 2021.

Gibb replied that schools would not have any problem getting devices for children who did not already have them and were at home as a result of having to self-isolate.

The Chair asked whether the department had weakened the remote learning requirements for schools and why schools were not being asked to have daily contact with pupils to ensure they were engaging.

The department had produced guidance on the back of considerable consultation with those that had to implement the policy on the ground, Gibb responded. As such, the guidance had taken a balanced position between the practical challenges faced by teachers and schools with the need to have regular contact with pupils.

## Exams Contingencies

C. Johnson noted that exceptions had been made for pupils that were unable to sit exams due to poor health and asked whether there were any contingencies being put in place in the instance that a larger number of pupils than predicted fell into that category.

The department had deliberately spaced out papers as much possible during the summer months so that pupils could sit at least one of two papers in each subject Gibb answered. There were then contingency papers in place for them to take, he said. However, Gibb recognised that the ability of exam boards to mark those papers would be determined by the volume of uptake for the contingency series.

Was there any contingency for home-learning pupils, C. Johnson subsequently questioned, to which Gibb replied that the department was exploring the various measures that could be used to assist pupils learning at home.

Anderson followed up by asking whether the department was providing support to schools to ensure that they could hold exams safely.

There was an exam service in the department, Gibb responded, which supported schools in attaining additional provision or facilities where needed. Further details on that matter, guidance, and support for exam boards, would be given in the new year, he added.

## University Places

Anderson noted that Scotland and Wales were assessing pupils at A-level differently, rather than by exam, as a result of the pandemic and questioned whether that differential could disadvantage English students when competing for university places.

No, Gibb answered, as universities were experienced in managing different qualifications, across the UK but also the world. As such universities are well placed to ensure equitable decisions regarding places even with differing exam regimes across the UK.

### **Child Food Poverty**

Did the Government's Holiday Activities Programme include education as well as wellbeing, sports and other activities, the Chair queried, to which Gibb replied that there were educational activities in the programme. However, it was key to remember that the programme was for the holiday period, Gibb said, and therefore should not be overly intensive in relation its educational elements.

However, Gibb encouraged a balance between education, wellbeing and sports in the Holiday Activities programme.