

Grading exams and assessments in summer 2023 and autumn 2022



PUBLISHED SEP 29, 2022
BY [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk)

I promised to set out as soon as possible the arrangements for grading next summer, to provide clarity for students, teachers, schools, colleges, universities and other users of qualifications.

This summer was an important step back towards normality. Our plans for 2023 take us a step further, whilst also recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I've visited schools and colleges up and down the country and I've seen young people's admirable resilience and dedication.

I can confirm that, in 2023, we will return to pre-pandemic grading as the next step in getting back to normal. But giving the 2023 cohort some protection against any impact of COVID-19 disruption is the right thing to do.

We are, therefore, putting in place the same protection that was given for the first cohorts of students taking reformed GCSEs and A levels from 2017 onwards. That meant not disadvantaging students who might have performed less well because they were the first to sit new exams.

Exams and other formal assessments give students the fairest chance to show what they know, understand and can do, because the rules are the same for everyone. It's important that we get back to normal so that grades set young people up for college, university or employment in the best possible way, and help them to make the right choices about their future.

Students' interests drive our decisions – both this year's students and past and future students. For us, that means

qualifications that maintain their value, now and in the future, and stand the test of time.

I set out below what this decision means for students, the protection we will build in for the 2023 cohort, and what those teaching and advising students need to know, particularly those predicting grades for UCAS applications.

Pre-pandemic standards for GCSE, AS and A level with protection for students

Students in the 2023 cohort have not experienced national school and college closures during their 2-year courses of study, but we know they have experienced some disruption. That's why we're putting in place some protection for this cohort.

As in any year, grade boundaries for every specification will be set by the senior examiners after they have reviewed the work produced by students in the assessments. But those senior examiners will be guided in their decisions about where to set grade boundaries by information about the grades achieved in pre-pandemic years by cohorts of students, along with prior attainment data. That means the 2023 cohort will be protected in grading terms if their exam performance is a little lower than before the pandemic.

Broadly speaking, therefore, a typical student who would have achieved an A grade in their A level geography before the pandemic will be just as likely to get an A next summer, even if their performance in the assessments is a little weaker in 2023 than it would have been before the pandemic.

We expect that overall results in 2023 will be much closer to pre-pandemic years than results since 2020. This decision means that results in 2023 will be lower than in 2022. At this point in the academic year, we can't be precise about results in specific subjects and specifications. Entries have not yet been made and students have not taken any exams. But there is no pre-determined 'quota' of grades.

November 2022 GCSEs

Some students will re-sit GCSE English language and/or maths in November. This will include students who wish to improve on their grade from summer 2022 or who had planned to enter in summer 2022 but were unable to do so.

For this reason, exam boards will align November 2022 grading with the standards from summer 2022. Aligning standards in November with the preceding summer is the approach that we took in 2020 and 2021.

Vocational and technical qualifications

For vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) taken in schools and colleges, alongside or instead of GCSEs and A levels, awarding organisations are expected to take account of the approach used in general qualifications so that students taking VTQs are not advantaged or disadvantaged in comparison. For these VTQs this means a return to pre-pandemic standards.

In T Levels, we have asked awarding organisations to be generous in the first years of awards, to reflect the fact these qualifications are new.

Predicted grades for UCAS

Teachers this term are predicting grades for their students to use for their UCAS applications. In line with UCAS guidance, many students will already have been given an indication of their predicted grades by their teachers.

It can be challenging for teachers to predict grades accurately at the best of times. In summer 2022, predicted grades were at their highest level. We expect predicted grades in summer 2023 to be much closer to those seen in pre-pandemic years. For 2023, we recommend that teachers use the familiar pre-pandemic standard as the basis for predicting their students' grades. That familiarity will make it easier for teachers to generate predictions for their students that are aspirational but achievable, in line with UCAS guidance.

UCAS and universities have told us that accurate predictions, determined in line with pre-pandemic arrangements, will

enable them to be more confident in offer-making. Universities will take account of how exams will be graded when they make their offers. That is why this grading decision is in the interest of students. To be clear, this decision has no effect on the availability of places.

Background

Last September I set out a provisional 2-year decision. I said that we planned to get back to pre-pandemic grading in 2023, and that 2022 results would broadly reflect a mid-way point between 2021 and 2019. Students were starting out on their 2-year programmes of study and it was important that they, and their teachers, should start with a sense of how they'd be graded at the end. At that time, no exams had happened for over 2 years and the disruption caused by the pandemic was keenly felt. I said then that we would review our position following the release of 2022 results, before confirming the approach for 2023.

Summer 2022 saw the welcome return to exams and other formal assessments, taken by more than a million students, which was a milestone in society returning to normal.

In 2023 and beyond, students will again have the opportunity to show what they know and can do in exams and formal assessments. Students up and down the country have told me over the past year that this is what they want.

The government and Ofqual have already confirmed some of the arrangements for 2023.

As public health measures are no longer in force, Ofqual confirmed in May that the usual pre-pandemic arrangements for non-exam assessment (NEA), fieldwork and practical science are now back in place for the 2023 cohort. The Department for Education confirmed at the same time the return to full subject content coverage for all GCSE subjects, so that students can study the full curriculum.

A summary of the arrangements for all GCSE, AS and A levels in 2023 can be found on our website.

The Department for Education (DfE) has asked us to continue to require exam boards to provide formulae and revised equation sheets for A level mathematics, physics and combined science exams. DfE has also asked us to permanently remove the requirement for exam boards to include unfamiliar vocabulary in GCSE modern foreign language assessments. We are consulting on both of these proposed arrangements.

DfE and Ofqual are also keen to build resilience in the exam system and learn lessons from the arrangements last year. A consultation has been launched which proposes that schools, colleges and exam centres should build collecting and retaining evidence of student performance into their normal arrangements for preparing students to take exams.

For VTQs in the academic year 2021 to 2022, awarding organisations decided which adaptations were appropriate for their qualifications in accordance with Ofqual's rules.

Some adaptations were in response to public health restrictions which are no longer in place, so these adaptations are no longer necessary. Awarding organisations may decide to continue to use practices developed during the pandemic which worked well, such as remote assessment or remote invigilation, and we are keeping these arrangements under review.

For VTQs used alongside or instead of GCSEs and A levels, awarding organisations were expected to take account of the approach to adaptations used in general qualifications to ensure that students were not advantaged or disadvantaged. In light of the announcements for GCSEs and A levels for 2023, we do not expect any further adaptations to be used in VTQs.

Press release distributed by Media Pigeon on behalf of GOV.UK, on Sep 29, 2022. For more information subscribe and [follow us](#).

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