



Approaches to certification in Scotland and other jurisdictions

High-level review of approaches to certification in Scotland and other jurisdictions as a result of COVID-19

Published: September 2022
Publication code: BE8542

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ
Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, EH22 1FD

www.sqa.org.uk

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Key findings

- ◆ Different jurisdictions deployed a range of assessment and certification strategies in 2020 and 2021 to cope with and mitigate the impact of COVID-19, including cancelling and postponing exams, making adaptations and adjustments, moving to school-based assessment and estimates, and exams going ahead as scheduled.
- ◆ Jurisdictions that fared best overall appear to be those where the existing methods of assessment are widely accepted by stakeholders and perceived to be the best and fairest system.
- ◆ Several jurisdictions, including those where internal assessment makes up a substantial part of a candidate's final mark, reiterated the importance of and their commitment to at least some form of external assessment.
- ◆ Many jurisdictions experienced controversy and conflicting views from different stakeholder groups on the fairest course of action to adopt. Concerns about fairness were expressed regarding individual learners affected by coronavirus, and in terms of maintaining national standards.
- ◆ There was concern in many jurisdictions regarding apparently increasing attainment gaps. It is difficult to say with any certainty at this stage whether these are the result of changes to assessment and certification specifically, or if they are a consequence of the wider effects of the pandemic and, for example, remote learning.
- ◆ Several jurisdictions — with quite distinct assessment systems — have witnessed apparent grade inflation and significant changes to normal grade distributions.
- ◆ Government policy on COVID-19, and school closures in particular, had a crucial role in subsequent decisions on assessment and certification.
- ◆ It is important to distinguish between the effects of different jurisdictions' existing assessment systems and how well different jurisdictions reacted to COVID itself.
- ◆ While the experiences of the past two years may have longer-term effects on external assessment particularly, it is too early to predict what these changes will be.

Summary table

The table below summarises the high-level 2021 approaches to assessment and certification in the jurisdictions researched in this paper.

Table 1 High-level approaches to assessment in 2021 in selected jurisdictions

Country	Examination	Awarding body	2021 approach to assessment
Scotland	National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher	SQA	Exams cancelled; centre assessed grades used instead
Denmark	Higher Preparatory Examination Certificate	Schools	Number of exams reduced
England	GCSE, AS and A level	AQA, OCR, Pearson	Exams cancelled; centre assessed grades used instead
France	Baccalaureate (general / technical / professional)	Ministry of education	Students took an oral exam and a written exam in Philosophy; other exams cancelled
Germany	Abitur	Länder	Exams went ahead, postponed by a few weeks in some Länder
Hong Kong	Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education	HKEAA	Assessment streamlined, but exams went ahead
Ireland	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Council	Exams went ahead but students could choose whether to sit them or receive accredited grades
Italy	Esame di Stato	Ministry of education	Written exams cancelled. Grades based on an oral exam and performance across upper secondary.
Netherlands	School Leaving Examination	Ministry of education	Exams went ahead with some adaptations
New Zealand	National Certificate of Educational Achievement	NZQA	Exams went ahead with some adjustments
Northern Ireland	GCSE, AS and A level	CCEA, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Exams cancelled; centre assessed grades used instead

Country	Examination	Awarding body	2021 approach to assessment
Norway	Leaving Certificate from Upper Secondary School	Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training	Exams cancelled; grades based on teacher assessment
Ontario	OSSD	Schools	The OSSD is wholly internally assessed
Queensland	Queensland Certificate of Education	QCAA	Assessments went ahead as scheduled
Singapore	GCE examinations	SEAB	Exams went ahead as scheduled
Wales	GCSE, AS and A level	WJEC, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Exams cancelled; centre assessed grades used instead

Introduction

This paper details the outcomes of research into how qualification assessment and certification in 2020 and 2021 were undertaken in a range of jurisdictions as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These jurisdictions include, but are not limited to, those that featured in the OECD's *Upper secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective*¹ published in August 2021.

The research helps us to understand whether there are any links between particular national approaches to summative assessment and how effectively those systems functioned during the pandemic.

According to UK ENIC, at the peak of COVID disruption, educational institutions were closed in 169 countries, affecting more than 80% of total enrolled learners worldwide. In 2020, national examinations for over 30 upper secondary qualifications were cancelled, and assessments for many others postponed or adapted. In 2021, school closures continued to affect learners across the world. National school closures were in place in 40 countries during the first six months of the year. The ongoing disruption led to changes to school examinations and assessment for a second time.²

*To a varying extent, education systems changed the calendar, content and mode of examinations and assessments. The variation in the extent to which countries deviated from their assessment and examination plans relates both to the pandemic context and to how important these tests were in their respective education systems.*³

Many countries made some changes to the syllabus or scope of the exams to mitigate disruption so that students would not be disadvantaged. For some subjects, school-based assessment was cancelled. In others, the duration and number of questions required for some exams were reduced. In some cases, the timing of exams was changed to allow for more preparation time. In other countries, the decision was taken to cancel exams and use an alternative means of assessment.

Different assessment systems

Different countries and jurisdictions have very different assessment systems, developed over time to meet differing requirements. As pointed out by Professor Stobart and others, those jurisdictions that rely predominately on examination results experienced more disruption when the pandemic arrived, as they needed to quickly develop procedures to determine grades in the absence of exams.

*The COVID-19 related crises seem to reveal the vulnerability of systems that rely exclusively on the results of examinations taken under standardised conditions and scheduled at a fixed time. By comparison, those systems that draw on multiple forms of evidence were indeed able to adapt more flexibly.*⁴

Countries that could draw on multiple modes of assessment in pre-pandemic times found it easier to substitute examinations with other ways to recognise student learning.⁵

Jurisdictions such as Norway and Queensland, then, had a relatively straightforward task in 2020 in ensuring that grades were based solely on teacher assessment in the COVID-enforced absence of any external assessments.

However, the context of Professor Stobart's report was the pandemic and its impacts in 2020. The consequences that year were most immediate and pressing for systems coming up to the end of the academic year and where assessment is end loaded. Had the pandemic arrived at a different point in the academic cycle, different impacts for different models of assessment would likely have been observed. When considering what makes an assessment system 'pandemic-proof', we need to be careful not to overgeneralise from the experiences of spring and summer 2020 in the western or northern hemisphere.

As Stobart (2021) suggests, the development of different assessment systems is generally a social, rather than scientific, process which reflects the jurisdiction's history and culture.⁶ It is unlikely that any of those jurisdictions that rely more on teacher assessment than exams designed their assessment systems with resilience in the face of a global pandemic in mind.

While there are undoubtedly lessons to be learned from such jurisdictions in the context of wider discussions about the future of assessment in Scotland, the question of how best Scotland should assess its young people is beyond the scope of this paper. There is a limit to how much we can learn from what Stobart terms 'high-trust' jurisdictions such as Ontario and Norway in terms of their approaches to certification specifically in the context of the COVID disruption, not least because Scotland's current school assessment system is more reliant on exam-based external assessment.

Both in Scotland and in other jurisdictions, there has been an understandable tendency to conflate the issue of how we responded (or should have responded) to the demands of the pandemic, and how we should assess young people now and in the future. Future models of qualification assessment will need to draw upon the experiences of the past two years as well as previous years, and will need to draw upon assessment expertise, technical literature, and comparative international literature to provide qualifications which have integrity and credibility and meet the needs of learners and end-users. In looking for lessons we can apply to any future model of assessment, we need to be clear what lessons about certification are specific to the context of COVID-19. Such lessons should not become confused with the work of others around the wider future of assessment in Scotland.

Changes to assessment

While systems more reliant on continuous, school-based assessment appeared to be more resilient⁷ through the 2020 COVID crisis (and few endured the rows and recriminations of the UK nations⁸), it would not be accurate to underplay the disruption to assessment caused by coronavirus across all jurisdictions. We should not underestimate how challenging this period has proved to be for all countries.

Different jurisdictions adopted quite different strategies in approaching assessment and certification in 2020 and 2021. As well as cancelling and postponing exams, for instance, some jurisdictions cancelled written exams (Italy, France), while others cancelled oral exams (Hong Kong, Norway). Many more made adaptations and adjustments to assessments, including reducing the number of papers or questions. It would be difficult to say that there was one perfect, or even nearly perfect, solution.

We've seen lots of different approaches and it's difficult to argue that one approach is better than another. Some countries had to have a school-based assessment in a system that did not have any coursework and was primarily exam based, and it becomes quite difficult to come to a calculated grade. Then there were other countries where coursework already accounted for a large percentage of the student grade. Others have coursework then had to account for lockdown and coursework happening at different times; there isn't an easy answer for the exam boards.⁹

Demonstrating the range of approaches taken, the International Association for Educational Assessment (IAEA) classified¹⁰ countries' actions with regards to high-stakes exams as:

- ◆ Exams cancelled and completed exams or school-based assessments used to produce results
- ◆ Exams cancelled and results produced with school-generated estimates
- ◆ Exams replaced with new online exams
- ◆ Exams postponed
- ◆ Exams went ahead as scheduled

The types of actions and adaptations chosen in different jurisdictions are likely to reflect the different priorities of those jurisdictions, reinforcing the societal nature of assessment systems.

Societal view of assessment

It is arguable that those jurisdictions where COVID qualification assessment arrangements were most accepted were not necessarily those that have mainly teacher-based assessment, but where the pre-pandemic model of assessment is widely perceived to be the best and fairest way to assess young people.

On the one hand, jurisdictions such as Ontario and Queensland, where teacher assessment traditionally plays a major role, could pivot to assessing within the context of a pandemic relatively straightforwardly. At the same time, in Hong Kong and Singapore, cultures that place value on high-stakes assessments, the decision to press on with planned exams was widely welcomed as the fairest solution.

In other jurisdictions the situation may have been less clear-cut, but similarly appeared to reflect a general consensus that their pre-pandemic methods of assessment are the correct and fairest ones. For example, in Germany there were disagreements about pressing ahead with exams, but ultimately these were thought important enough to continue with. In Norway, although 80% of a candidate's final mark is teacher assessed, the government still

attempted (ultimately unsuccessfully) to reintroduce an element of external assessment in 2021. Indeed, several jurisdictions which in normal times have a substantial element of internal assessment deemed it important to reinstate some measure of their pre-pandemic external assessment in 2021.

Meanwhile, Scotland appears to be at a crossroads in wider discussions about the future of assessment, and arguably lacks consensus on how best to assess young people. Consequently it is difficult to think of any solution to the COVID crisis that would have been widely accepted across all sections of society as the fairest and best way to proceed.

The importance of external assessment

Countries that include a substantial teacher assessment component in their qualifications found it easier to adjust to certification in 2020.¹¹ However, it is notable, as mentioned above, that there was a desire to see a return to external assessment as soon as possible in a number of jurisdictions. Even where external assessment only ordinarily makes up a minor proportion of a candidate's final grade, a range of governments and stakeholders emphasised its importance when deciding how candidates should be assessed in 2021.

For instance, in Denmark, the education minister stated:

*Young people need exam training. That's why we have cancelled a lot of exams, but also kept some as they are.*¹²

In Ireland, the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) president Martin Marjoram said that external assessment and state certification — which retain significant public trust — are essential.¹³ In announcing that the 2021 national exams would go ahead, the Dutch minister for education stated that there was agreement from almost all parties on the importance of the central examination.¹⁴

And the Norwegian government emphasised the importance of external assessment to their system:

*The grades the students receive must be correct and fair, as far as possible. It is good for both the individual student and the other students you compete against in the admission to upper secondary education and higher education. When we now have to cancel the written exam, it is therefore important that we look at other possibilities for an external assessment.*¹⁵

Broader government COVID-19 policy and its interaction with qualification policy

Decisions taken by regulators and awarding bodies in different countries were taken in the context of their respective governments' broader decision-making to manage the pandemic. In Denmark, for example, there was an early focus on re-opening schools. Singapore, with a modern and spacious school estate, took a targeted and agile approach to school closure. In the Netherlands, exam candidates continued to attend school despite a nationwide

lockdown. Policies such as these had an effect on later decisions about assessment and certification.

Reaction

Other countries too faced substantial challenges in implementing changes to qualification assessment in the face of COVID, particularly in 2020. Governments, teaching unions, learners, and parents and carers often had conflicting views on the best course of action and the fairness of proposed changes.

Moreover, it is worth noting that the policy solutions eventually implemented in the UK nations in 2020 (ie, in August 2020) might not have been acceptable if they had been put in place in March 2020.

A problematic policy solution was rejected during the first window then accepted wholeheartedly during the second. Although this solution would have almost certainly been criticised heavily and widely if chosen during the first window, it became the only feasible solution and a lifeline to all four governments during the second. By then [...] policymakers [were] under pressure to change policy quickly.¹⁶

Only in those jurisdictions where there was little change to already established and accepted methods of assessment and certification (as noted above, Ontario and Queensland, Hong Kong and Singapore) were the criticisms more muted.

Much post-results criticism and concern focused on equity and grade inflation.

Equity

The publication of results in 2021 has given rise to widespread concern across jurisdictions about increasing disparities in results between different groups of learners, including those of different ethnicities and those in different socio-economic groups.¹⁷ While there may be concerns about, for example, teacher bias in internal assessment,¹⁸ it is difficult to disentangle the effects on attainment of the pandemic, school closures, remote learning, learning loss and assessment.

Concerns around disparities between different groups of learners exist across many countries, regardless of their method of assessment, and it is possible that the cause has less to do with assessment and certification put in place in 2020 and 2021, and more to do with the wider differential effects of the pandemic.

There is little doubt that the negative impact of the pandemic has been greater among disadvantaged populations.¹⁹

The OECD states that the evidence regarding the evolution of gaps between children affected by COVID lockdowns and their pre-2020 peers is mixed and limited, and time will be needed before it is possible to gain a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of the pandemic on achievement.²⁰

Grade inflation

There has been widespread concern about the impact of the pandemic on the quality and quantity of teaching and learning, and drops in performance over the COVID period. Nevertheless, 2020 and 2021 have seen apparent grade inflation in a number of qualifications across jurisdictions. A common feature has been attainment rates in both 2020 and 2021 being higher than before the pandemic.

The differences between how grades were determined during the pandemic and in previous years means that it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons about standards and student attainment. However, there have been significant changes to grade distributions for some qualifications. Replacing exams with continuous or teacher assessment typically results in higher grades for students.²¹

Across jurisdictions, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of top grades awarded. Aside from Hong Kong and Singapore, where exams went ahead relatively normally, grade inflation and changes in the distribution of grades has affected systems as disparate as France, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand and Norway, as well as the UK nations.

This has affected higher education admissions in a number of countries and caused concern about what happens, post-COVID.²²

Returning to the previous assessment and grading practices is likely to lead to lower pass rates and lower grades overall compared to 2020 and 2021. A key consideration for government and exam boards will be ensuring both fairness across different cohorts of students and ongoing validity of results.²³

Relatively few jurisdictions have said publicly how they plan to address this issue.

While some reaction to grade inflation and changes to grade distributions has emphasised its likely complex causes (for example, teachers giving candidates the benefit of the doubt, candidates suffering from less stress, more time for candidates to study, the use of different assessment methods), other reaction has, possibly predictably, focused on a perceived downgrading of standards.

Questions about the future of assessment

Much commentary has been produced over the past two years speculating that COVID-19 will spell — or hasten — the end of examinations as we know them²⁴. The pandemic changed the assessment landscape and that of national examinations; might it permanently change the constructs that should be assessed?

Should we be thinking now about assessing students in different ways that are robust to change and, at the same time, allow us to catch up with what all the research tells us about the types of skills that we should actually be assessing?²⁵

Some have noted that changes such as shifts to school-based assessment could last beyond the pandemic. However, there does not seem to be an immediate rush to implement wholesale changes to assessment and certification systems. While there are contingencies in place, and a number of countries will still have some modifications to 2022 external assessment, on the whole, jurisdictions intend to return to their pre-2020 approaches.

Much of the commentary on the effects of COVID on external assessment has centred on the 2020 experience, where the first wave came towards the end of the academic session. The same is true of questions raised about the resilience and robustness of external assessment systems. There appears to have been little detailed research on 2021 assessment models thus far. While the 2020 experience will feed into and inform larger and ongoing discussions about the fitness for purpose of assessment in the 21st century, it cannot be the only driver.

Specific jurisdictions

For each jurisdiction, the following information has been gathered:

- ◆ pre-pandemic assessment context
- ◆ changes to exams and assessment implemented in 2020 and 2021
- ◆ effect of the changes to exams and assessment
- ◆ reaction to and perception of the changes to exams and assessment

Important note: New Zealand, Queensland and Singapore have different patterns of school year to the northern hemisphere jurisdictions. Their exams and final assessments run in September, October, November and December. Therefore, the initial lockdowns arrived at a different point in their school year and assessment cycle than in northern hemisphere jurisdictions.

Information on the various jurisdictions covered in this report has been compiled through readily available data in the English language (or easily translated into the English language); it may therefore contain unavoidable omissions or misinterpretations.

Denmark

Context

Denmark has school leaving exams (at the end of 9th grade) and advanced school leaving exams (at the end of 10th grade).

At the end of 9th grade, students sit final examinations. Students must sit examinations in a total of seven subjects. Five of the subjects are compulsory for all students: written and oral examinations in Danish, a written examination in Mathematics and oral examinations in English and Physics/Chemistry. Moreover, each student must additionally sit for two examinations that are drawn at random, one from the humanities group (which includes written English as well as French or German, History, Social Studies, and Christian Studies) and one from the science group, which consists of Geography or Biology. The examinations at the conclusion of the 9th grade are compulsory.²⁶

At the end of 10th grade, students can sit examinations in one or more of the following subjects: Danish, Mathematics, English, German/French, and Physics/Chemistry. Additionally, students can elect to sit for one or more of the 9th form level examinations in Danish, Mathematics, English, or Physics/Chemistry, or choose a combination of 9th and 10th form level examinations.²⁷

The ministry of education sets all written examination questions and appoints external examiners for all examinations, both oral and written.²⁸

A student's certificate will contain:

- ◆ examination marks
- ◆ marks for the year's work
- ◆ marks for specialised study projects/major written assignments
- ◆ average marks²⁹

Danish education is highly decentralised and school autonomy levels are high.³⁰ Moreover, students have the right to form a student council at their school and the school must ensure that students are involved in the planning of teaching.³¹

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

On 11 March 2020, Denmark announced the closure of all educational institutions.³² A phased re-opening began on 15 April 2020. Students' legal right to quality education and the need to ensure access to it were critical in the decision to re-open education institutions. Denmark was among the first countries in Europe to do this.³³

In 2020, exams used for progression within school were cancelled and students automatically transitioned to the grade above. It was decided to maintain examinations in upper secondary for core subjects only; other subjects would be assessed through marks awarded at the end of the school year.³⁴

The calculation of the grade point average will be based on the results in previous and this year's examinations as well as the final grades.³⁵

Denmark's schools were closed again from December 2020, with a gradual and staggered re-opening from February 2021.³⁶ In 2021, again the number of exams was reduced.

There will be four examinations of which written Danish is compulsory. The other three may vary but the third and final examination must be oral. Under normal circumstances there are between seven and nine examinations. In the subjects with no examination the marks for the entire year's work will be converted into examination marks.³⁷

The government stated that this was a trade-off, allowing more teaching and learning time, to account for school closures, but they emphasised that external exams were important for students:

Young people need exam training. That's why we have cancelled a lot of exams, but also kept some as they are.³⁸

Impact of changes to assessment

While Statistics Denmark publishes data on entries and completions at the upper secondary level,³⁹ it has not been possible to find school leaving exam attainment data to compare exam performance in 2020 and 2021 with pre-pandemic levels.

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

While, in common with many other countries, there was concern about the effect of school closures and remote learning on specific groups of learners⁴⁰ in particular, the government's decision to reduce the number of exams in 2020 and 2021 seems to have been widely accepted.

England

Context

The GCSE is a single-subject qualification typically taken at age 16 at the end of a two-year programme of study. GCSEs are available in a wide range of general (academic) subjects and in some vocational/applied areas. Students typically take eight or more subjects.

A levels and AS levels are single-subject qualifications available in a wide range of subjects. Students typically take three or four subjects at AS Level and continue with two or three of these subjects to A Level.

GCSEs, AS levels and A levels are provided and certified by external awarding organisations, working within a common regulatory framework. Awarding organisations' specifications must be accredited by Ofqual — the qualifications regulator — as meeting its qualification-specific requirements.

Assessment is mainly by written examination. Other types of assessment are used only where they are needed to test specific skills.

GCSEs are graded 9 to 1 (where 9 is the highest available grade). A grade 5 is considered a 'strong pass'; a grade 4 is considered a 'standard pass'. A level and AS level passes are graded on a scale of A* to E. The A* grade was introduced in 2010 to reward the most exceptional candidates. The grade U denotes a fail.⁴¹

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

All exams for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs were cancelled in 2020 and 2021.

In 2020, schools and colleges were asked to provide centre assessment grades (CAGs) for each subject. This grade was intended to reflect the grade that the student would most likely have achieved if they had sat the exam. Schools and colleges were also asked to submit the rank order of students within each grade for each subject, which was used within the statistical standardisation process and not shared with students. Initially, students were issued the results calculated following the standardisation process. However, after the statistical standardisation was judged to be unfair, students were awarded the CAGs submitted by their schools if they were higher than their standardised grades.⁴²

In 2021, the process was different. Ranking of students was not required and there was no statistical standardisation of results nationally. Detailed guidance was issued by Ofqual⁴³ and by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)⁴⁴ on how teachers should determine the grades. Examination boards have also published details of their processes for awarding qualifications.⁴⁵

Results were based on grades submitted to exam boards by teachers. The teacher assessed grades (TAGs) were to be determined by teachers drawing upon a range of evidence, such as non-exam assessment, work completed in class, class tests, and mock exams, and were subject to quality assurance processes.

Since the pandemic caused different levels of disruption across the country, many schools and colleges had not been able to teach all the course content. In response, students were only assessed on the content they had been taught, while it was ensured that there had been sufficient coverage of the curriculum to enable progression. Centres were given flexibility to decide how to assess their students' performance. This flexibility was to accommodate ongoing disruption to teaching.⁴⁶

Schools and colleges were required to put in place internal quality assurance processes. At least two people were involved in each judgement and the head of each school or college had to sign off the grades. They also submitted some examples of students' work to the exam boards as requested.⁴⁷

Exam boards put in place external quality assurance arrangements, checking each centre's policy, reviewing the profile of grades submitted, and reviewing samples of student work. Where exam boards had concerns, these were followed up with the school or college, and in some cases teachers reconsidered their judgements and submitted revised grades.⁴⁸

Impact of changes to assessment

The assessment arrangements in 2020 and again in 2021 were quite unlike those typically used. Normally students sit the same assessments at the same time and under the same conditions, and they are marked and graded using standardised methods. Without the normal mechanisms used to secure standards over time and between students, outcomes looked different from previous years.⁴⁹

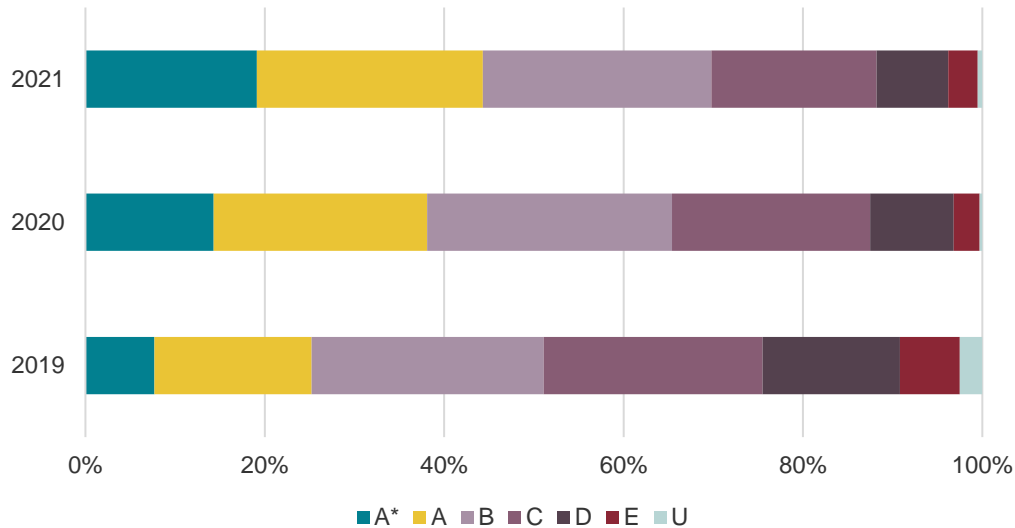
According to Ofqual,

*The overall increase in outcomes this year compared to previous years may partly reflect the change in assessment arrangements, for example, teachers may have given students some benefit of the doubt across the multiple opportunities many students had to show what they had learned — quite different from end of course exams.*⁵⁰

At all levels, outcomes in 2020 and 2021 were higher than in (pre-pandemic) 2019. Comparing 2020 and 2021 outcomes, overall A level outcomes were higher at the top grades (A* to B) and relatively stable at the lower grades (C to E).⁵¹

A level grade distributions are shown in Figure 4. This shows the substantial increase at A* and A grades over the period, with increases between 2019 and 2021 of 11.4 percentage points (pp) and 7.7pp, respectively.

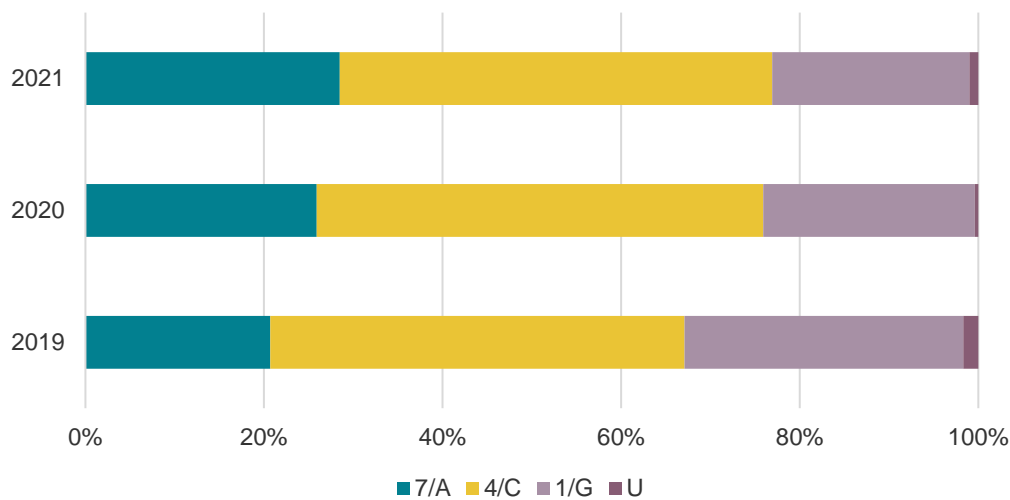
Figure 1 English A level grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

The increase in higher grades at GCSE is less marked than that seen at A level over the 2019 to 2021 period. Overall GCSE outcomes are higher at grade 7 in 2021 compared to both 2019 and 2020 (by 7.8pp and 2.6pp, respectively). Figure 5 shows the GCSE grade distributions for 2019, 2020, and 2021.

Figure 2 English GCSE grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

AS levels have much smaller numbers of entries, but the pattern of increased higher grades over the 2019 to 2021 period is repeated here.

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Roger Taylor, former chair of Ofqual, has stated that the issues around results in the summer of 2020 were remarkable for two particular features: the broad consensus in advance that it was the right thing to do and then, in the event, the overwhelming rejection by the people affected.⁵² There is little agreement about what exactly went wrong in 2020; suggestions include that the algorithm was not accurate enough, that it was biased, that communication needed to be better, and that wider consultation would have improved these issues. The Office for Statistical Regulation has suggested that part of the problem was over-optimism about what algorithms can achieve.⁵³

Regardless of what exactly went wrong, cancelling exams made it impossible to know what grades learners would have received had they gone ahead. While it was decided that using moderated teacher grades was the fairest way to plug this information gap, for individuals the problem looked different. They felt that they had been denied the chance to demonstrate their abilities.⁵⁴

In 2021, then, TAGs were based instead on learners' demonstrated achievement. While exam boards queried submitted grades in 15% of schools and colleges, only 1% were altered.⁵⁵

The publication of results saw concerns expressed about grade inflation.⁵⁶

It's likely that this year's approach and context exerted an upward pressure on grades. We cannot know at this stage how much of this upward pressure was due to teachers giving students at grade boundaries the benefit of the doubt, teachers having a more holistic understanding of students' abilities (especially those who might have otherwise had a bad exam day), or other external pressures to increase grades, such as parental pressure. The scale of the increases may suggest that a combination of factors played a role.⁵⁷

Part of the concern about grade inflation in 2021 encompassed the issue of increased pressure on university places.^{58, 59} Dr Tim Bradshaw, chief executive of the Russell Group, warned increases in the top grades meant that some university courses 'may not be able to accept students who narrowly missed their offer grades this time.'

Another concern has been the widening of the gap between those eligible for free school meals and their peers and between black pupils and their peers⁶⁰. However, Ofqual has said that it is difficult to ascertain whether this has been as a result of the use of TAGs, or the effect of COVID on teaching and learning for these groups.⁶¹

Although the proportion of top grades achieved in 2021 increased for all groups, some actually saw a small relative decrease in outcomes when compared to other groups. For example, boys saw a relative decrease when compared to girls, SEND pupils saw a decrease when compared to non-SEND children, and pupils in secondary selective schools, sixth form and tertiary colleges saw decreases when compared to those in academies.⁶²

France

Context

Entry to higher education in France is typically based on the *Diplôme du baccalauréat*, also known as the 'Bac', a three-year upper secondary qualification finishing after 12 years of schooling. As part of reforms begun before COVID-19, from 2021 the baccalaureate now comprises more continuous assessment.⁶³

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

On 12 March 2020, France announced the closure of all educational institutions. The re-opening of classes began on 11 May.⁶⁴

For 2020, grades were based on continuous assessment throughout the year. Grades achieved in the first-year exams also counted towards the final grade. Assessments carried out during the lockdown period were not taken into account. Grades were then moderated and reviewed by an examination panel.⁶⁵

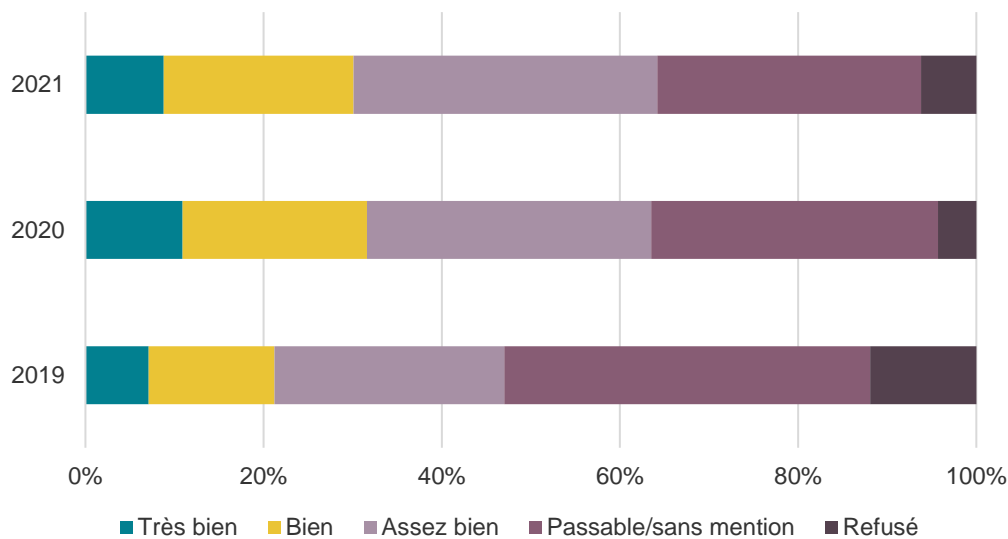
In 2021, assessment for the *Baccalauréat* changed as part of (pre-pandemic) planned reforms, but it was also disrupted by the continued impact of the pandemic. As part of the planned changes, final grades are now based on both final exams (60%) and continuous assessment (40%), and students sit fewer exams than in the past. In a normal year under the new system, students in *terminale* (final year) will sit written exams in Philosophy and their two chosen subjects of specialisation, and take a final oral exam. Students in *première* (penultimate year) sit an exam in French.⁶⁶

In 2021, specialisation subjects were assessed through continuous assessment, after the exams (which were originally scheduled to take place in March) were cancelled.⁶⁷ The final Philosophy exam and oral exam for students in *terminale* went ahead in June. The French exam for students in *première* was also held in June.⁶⁸

Impact of changes to assessment

The changes to assessment have affected results. The overall pass rate in 2021 was 93.8%. This is slightly lower than the 95.7% of candidates who passed in 2020. However, it is higher than all other years prior to that. 64.2% of students achieved a *mention* (a *très bien*, *bien*, or *assez bien* pass), compared to 63.5% in 2020 and 47% in 2019.⁶⁹

Figure 3 French Baccalauréat grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: Direction de l'évaluation de la prospective et de la performance (DEPP)

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Overall, reaction to the changes has been mixed. While some students believed the changes represented an effective way of marking ideas and work, others apparently felt demotivated to study as they had become accustomed to exams being cancelled.

In 2020, the *Times* reported that French teaching unions had suggested that examiners were asked to show 'extreme benevolence' to candidates which had led to a 'laughable' fall in standards.⁷⁰

Concerns were amplified by the fact that the pandemic hit during a long-awaited four-year reform of the French system.

Left-wing teaching unions opposed to the reform seized on the leap in the pass rate to defend old-fashioned exams, which they say are the only way to ensure a level playing field.⁷¹

Given the increase in pass rates in 2020, the government created an extra 10,000 university places.⁷²

Germany

Context

Education policy in Germany is the responsibility of individual states, or *Länder*.

Upper secondary in Germany concludes with the *Abitur* examination. In almost all *Länder* this is generally set state-wide by the ministry of education and cultural affairs.

The *Abitur* covers four or five subjects, which must include two of the following three subjects: German, a foreign language and Mathematics. Additionally, all three subject areas (languages, literature, and the arts; social sciences; mathematics, natural sciences, and technology) must be included in the examination. As a rule, written (and possibly oral) examinations are taken in three subjects, while in the fourth subject only an oral examination is taken. Depending on the legislation of a *Land*, a fifth subject can be examined in either oral or written form.⁷³

The final grades of the *Abitur* are based on the marks obtained in the examinations and on class performance in all subjects (up to 10) during the last two years of upper secondary education.⁷⁴

The certificate (*Zeugnis der Allgemeinen Hochschulreife*) is issued in the *Länder* between mid-June and mid-July.⁷⁵

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

In 2020, the *Länder* were divided on whether exams should go ahead or not.⁷⁶ Despite nationwide school closures until Easter and the opposition of some *Land* governments which had wanted grades to be awarded on coursework and school tests, the 16 *Länder* agreed in late March that the exams should take place as planned.⁷⁷

Exams were held in well-aired classrooms rather than big halls, sitting at least 1.5 metres apart.

In 2021, again exams went ahead.⁷⁸ This was despite further school closures⁷⁹ and different responses and policies to closures and re-openings in the different *Länder*. For example, in some *Länder*, all exam students returned to school at the same time while in others smaller groups attended on alternate days.⁸⁰

Impact of changes to assessment

Although the states have taken steps to ensure a high degree of uniformity in their individual systems, there are some major differences. As a result, there is no single Germany-wide date when school examination results are published — dates vary from state to state, and might even vary in different counties or cities within the same state. There are no national figures available on grade distributions.⁸¹

Nevertheless, there were some reports of *Abitur* grades being higher than normal. As *The Guardian* stated:

Several states reported results that were marginally higher than usual, thanks — educationalists speculate — less to a subconscious ‘corona-bonus’ during marking than to the fact that Germany’s COVID-19

*restrictions meant students had fewer distractions and were more focused on their work.*⁸²

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

The decision of Germany's *Länder* to go ahead with exams was not without controversy, given health concerns and school closures. Some students protested, pleading health concerns, revision difficulties and undue psychological pressure.⁸³

Hong Kong

Context

The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) was introduced in 2012. Most school candidates may take four core subjects (Chinese Language, English Language, Mathematics and Liberal Studies/Citizenship and Social Development), plus two or three from twenty elective subjects grouped as category A Traditional Academic subjects,⁸⁴ category B Applied Learning subjects, or category C Other Language subjects.⁸⁵

Candidates' achievements are reported against a set of standards divided into five levels (levels 1 to 5), with 5 being the highest. Candidates with the best performance in level 5 are awarded a 5**, and the next top group is awarded a 5*.⁸⁶

School-based assessment (SBA) is an assessment carried out by schools with students being assessed by their own subject teachers. All school candidates have to complete the SBA and the marks awarded are counted towards their results in the HKDSE. To ensure the reliability and comparability of assessment standards across schools, the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) moderates SBA marks submitted by different schools, either through statistical moderation or expert judgement.⁸⁷

According to Stobart:

For a strongly examination-focused culture such as Hong Kong, China, the introduction of school-based assessment contributing to final grades has been a contentious process. The aim has been to encourage broader study, but the need for comparable results between both schools and subjects has led to demanding, and disputed, moderation processes. This in turn has led to teacher resistance, particularly at the workload involved and concern about the moderation processes which include complex statistical moderation of coursework marks.⁸⁸

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

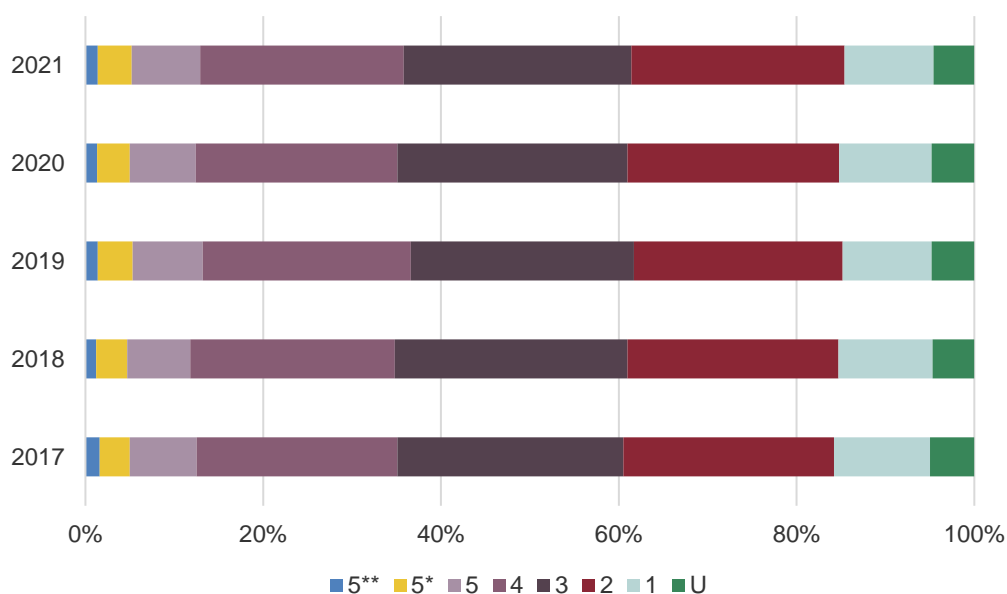
HKDSE exams went ahead in Hong Kong in both 2020 and 2021. In both years, exams were delayed by a month and precautionary arrangements were in place, for example, to ensure that candidates remained 1.8 m apart in exam halls.⁸⁹

In 2020, the Chinese Language and English Language speaking examinations were cancelled and school-based assessment carried more weight than usual.⁹⁰ For 2021, HKEAA put in place what they described as contingency streamlining of the examinations to account for the COVID-disrupted learning and teaching of that year's cohort.⁹¹ As well as the cancellation of speaking exams, modifications included making certain compulsory elements optional, combining topics in questions, cancelling several papers, reducing time requirements, merging papers, and reducing the number of questions in some papers.

Impact of changes to assessment

Category A Traditional Academic subject data^{92,93} from the past five years demonstrates that 2020 and 2021 results do not show any grade inflation or any significant change in grade distribution from previous years.

Figure 4 HKDSE category A subjects grade distributions, 2017–21



Source: HKEAA

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

As Professor Stobart pointed out, Hong Kong is a society that values examinations as central to selection and progress. Examination results are high-stakes for students as there is intense competition for government-funded university places.⁹⁴ In common with other countries in East Asia, Hong Kong pushed on with large-scale exams despite the pandemic because it was perceived that cancelling them would create new problems and cause discontent among students and their families.⁹⁵

Each year, the HKEAA publishes research comparing schools' predicted grades with actual results in the HKDSE category A subjects. In 2021:

Among the four core subjects, the outcome of English Language is more accurate with the predicted levels of 71% of candidates matching their actual HKDSE levels. About 28% of the predicted levels are one level above or below candidates' actual levels. In other words, more than 99% of predictions lie within one-level deviation from HKDSE actual levels. For the other three core subjects, the percentages of exact matching with the actual HKDSE levels for Chinese Language, Mathematics Compulsory Part and Liberal Studies are about 51%, 58% and 54% respectively, while about 40% of the predicted levels lie one level above or below candidates' actual levels in the HKDSE.⁹⁶

While the HKEAA suggested that this shows that school assessments can 'in general' reflect students' performance in the HKDSE, they did suggest (in 2020) that the variance means that predicted grades would only be used as a last resort should exams have to be cancelled.⁹⁷ Indeed, most of the press coverage around the predicted grades research centred on the perceived lack of accuracy in such grades.^{98,99} There appears to be widespread agreement, including amongst teachers, that exams are a more reliable measure of candidates' abilities.¹⁰⁰

Ireland

Context

The Leaving Certificate grants access to higher education in Ireland. It is usually assessed through final written examinations, with additional oral and practical examinations in some subjects. Examinations are administered by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

In 2020, the initial response to the lockdown was to move the examinations to 29 July, with students returning to school two weeks before this. This led to a strong student protest, with a poll of 24,000 final-year students showing that 80% favoured the cancellation of the examinations. In a change of policy, the final-year examinations were then cancelled with grades being determined by schools and then moderated through a national standardisation process. A chance to take the Leaving Certificate examination was offered in November 2020, with over 2,000 students taking at least one subject.¹⁰¹

The majority (79%) of grades submitted by schools remained unchanged following the standardisation process.¹⁰²

By contrast, Leaving Certificate exams were held in June 2021, but for each subject, students were able to choose whether to sit the exams or receive an accredited grade from the SEC. Students could also opt to both sit the exam and receive an accredited grade; the higher grade would be recorded in the Leaving Certificate results. Oral and coursework components count towards final grades where exams were taken, but do not count towards accredited grades.¹⁰³ Accredited grades are based on:

- ◆ an estimated percentage mark for a student's expected performance in the exam, provided by the school
- ◆ national data on students' performance in previous exams

Accredited grades were subject to an alignment process within individual schools and national standardisation.¹⁰⁴ In most subjects, 65–80% of students opted to sit the exams. Accredited grades were calculated for all students, as long as sufficient evidence was available.

Impact of changes to assessment

In 2020, overall grades were higher than previous years;¹⁰⁵ at higher level, 9.3% of entries received the top grade, compared to 5.9% in 2019. Around 60% of estimated grades at higher level would need to have been lowered to bring results in line with previous years.¹⁰⁶

2021 results were released in September 2021. *The Irish Times* reported that results had reached a record-high, with 'a sharp increase in the number of students securing top grades.'¹⁰⁷ On average, 2021 grades were up by 2.4% on the (already inflated) 2020 figures. The percentage of students who got top marks in Biology, for example, rose from 11.6% in 2020 to 17.4% in 2021. The number who received an H1 in Maths was up 6.5pp, from 8.6% to 15.1%.¹⁰⁸

The Irish Times said¹⁰⁹ their five key takeaways were:

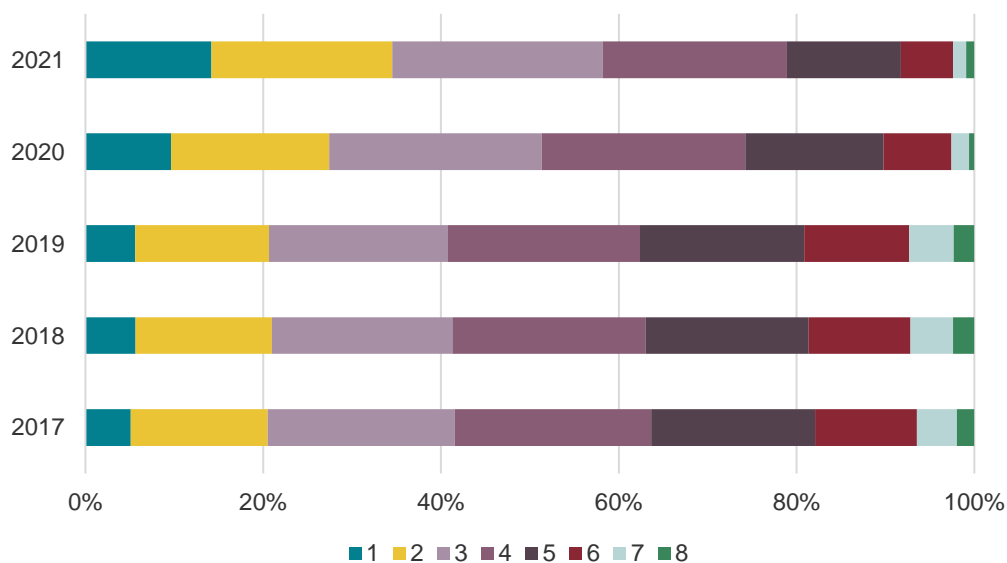
- ◆ 2021 was a record-breaking year because of ‘the only hybrid exam structure in the world’.
- ◆ Grade inflation is highest in higher-level papers.
- ◆ Only 8% of students opted not to register for any written exam. However, only 60% of papers were actually taken by students. Despite registering and keeping their options open, students clearly targeted certain exams.
- ◆ The situation was a win-win for students. In 53% of results, students were credited with their school-generated accredited grade. The written exam results were higher than accredited grades in 16% of papers. The results were the same between accredited grades and written exams in 31% of results.
- ◆ The results have put pressure on the university admissions process.

Leaving Certificate subjects are normally studied at either Ordinary or Higher Level. Two subjects, Irish and Mathematics, can also be studied at Foundation Level. The examination scale has 8 grades, the highest grade is Grade 1, and the lowest grade is Grade 8. Marks between 100% and 30% are divided into seven grade bands (1–7). Each band is 10% wide.¹¹⁰

The charts in Figures 9, 10 and 11 show subject-aggregated Leaving Certificate grade distributions over the past five years, in the pre-pandemic 2017, 2018, and 2019 and in the disrupted 2020 and 2021.¹¹¹ SEC Leaving Certificate data is disseminated by subject, so these charts have been compiled from aggregated data and should be treated as indicative only. (SEC has confirmed by email that it does not provide aggregate data for all subjects but that the data it releases should be manipulated.)

Higher level Grade 1 awards have increased from around 5% pre-COVID to 10% in 2020 and 14% in 2021.

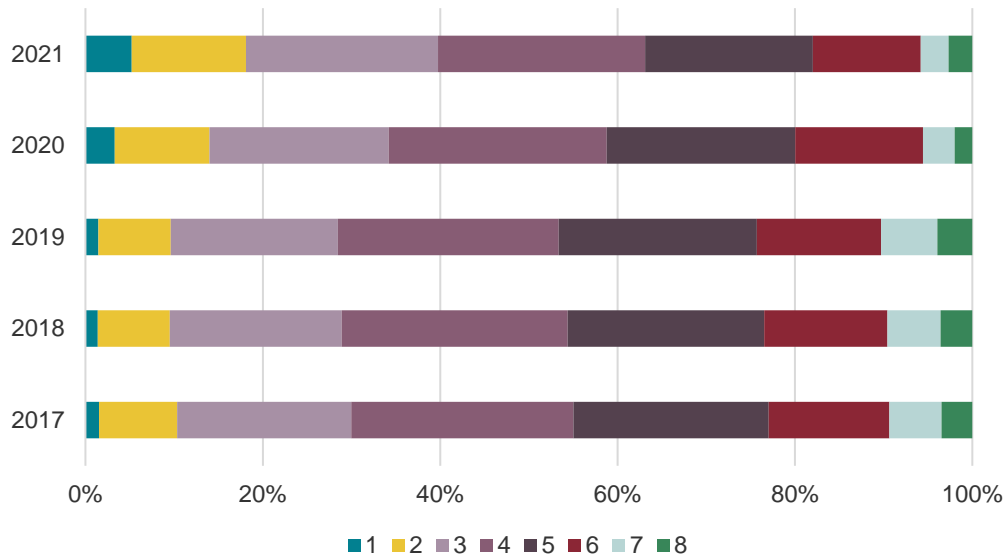
Figure 5 Higher level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2017–21



Source: SEC

At Ordinary level, the proportion of awards given a Grade 1 or 2 has increased from around 10% in 2017 to 18% in 2021.

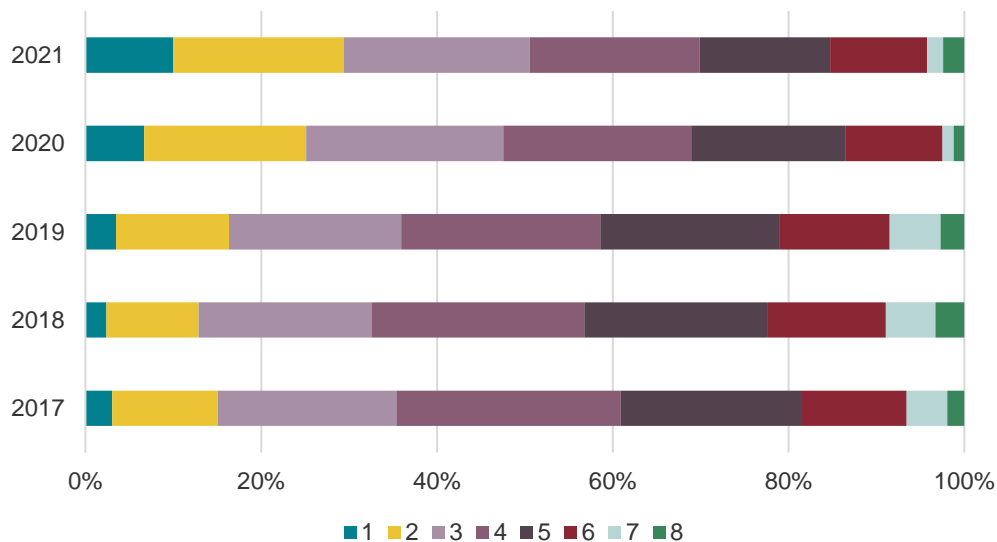
Figure 6 Ordinary level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2017–21



Source: SEC

Only available in Irish and Mathematics, entry numbers for Foundation level Leaving Certificates are much lower. Here, too, however, there is evidence of apparent grade inflation over the past couple of years.

Figure 7 Foundation level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2017–21



Source: SEC

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

There have been concerns about grade inflation over the past two years, and particularly that higher grades will push up Central Applications Office (CAO) points. However, Minister for Education Norma Foley said that significant additional higher education places are being provided this year to ease some of this pressure. Foley also explained that the decision to provide a 'unique' system of accredited grades and written exams was aimed at ensuring equity and fairness for students.¹¹²

However, teachers' unions are opposed to assessing their own students for state certificate purposes. Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) president Martin Marjoram said the union's co-operation with this year's accredited grades system was on an emergency basis and that external assessment and state certification — which retain significant public trust — are essential.¹¹³

Young people deserve a state exams process that is consistent with their expectations and that they can trust. External assessment administered by the State Examinations Commission ensures that the Leaving and Junior Cert exams processes remain transparent, objective and fair.¹¹⁴

Italy

Context

*Diploma di Esame di Stato*¹¹⁵ is the upper secondary school leaving certificate (formerly known as *Diploma di Maturità*). Students obtaining the Diploma from either *licei* or technical and vocational *istituti* can progress to higher education. The Diploma includes teacher-assessed elements as well as externally-assessed written and oral examinations. The final mark of the Diploma comes from the sum of the average marks achieved by each student in the last three years of upper secondary school and the marks achieved in the three elements of the final-year assessments.

Each year the final-year exam subjects are selected at a national level by the Italian Ministry of Education (*Ministero dell'Istruzione*). Assessments are undertaken at a regional/state level following national guidance.¹¹⁶

From 2019, the state examination included two written national exams and an oral examination. The questions for the first and second written exams are selected by the Ministry of Education from a selection of questions drawn up by an ad hoc commission. On successful completion of final-year exams, a student is awarded the *Diploma Liceale* or the *Diploma di Esame di Stato*. These exams are taken by students at the age of 19, after a total of 13 years of formal education.¹¹⁷

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

Italy experienced the first wave of lockdown earlier than many other countries in 2020. The government suspended in-person teaching for all ages for a period of 35 weeks from 9 March 2020. Schools throughout the country remained closed for the remainder of the 2019–20 academic year. Changes to the existing assessment in 2020 included the cancellation of all written examinations.¹¹⁸ The Ministry of Education invested €85m in schools to support distance learning.

Traditionally, the assessments for those in the final year of school consist of a combination of written, oral and teacher assessments. In the absence of written examinations, the weighting of both the oral and internal teacher assessments were increased.

Table 2 highlights the changes to the final-year exams as a result of COVID-19 in Italy.

Table 2 Changes to final-year exams in Italy, 2020 and 2021

Component	Points — 2021	Points — 2020	Points — other years
Written exams	–	–	45
Oral exam	40	40	35
Internal school assessment	60	60	20
Total	100	100	100

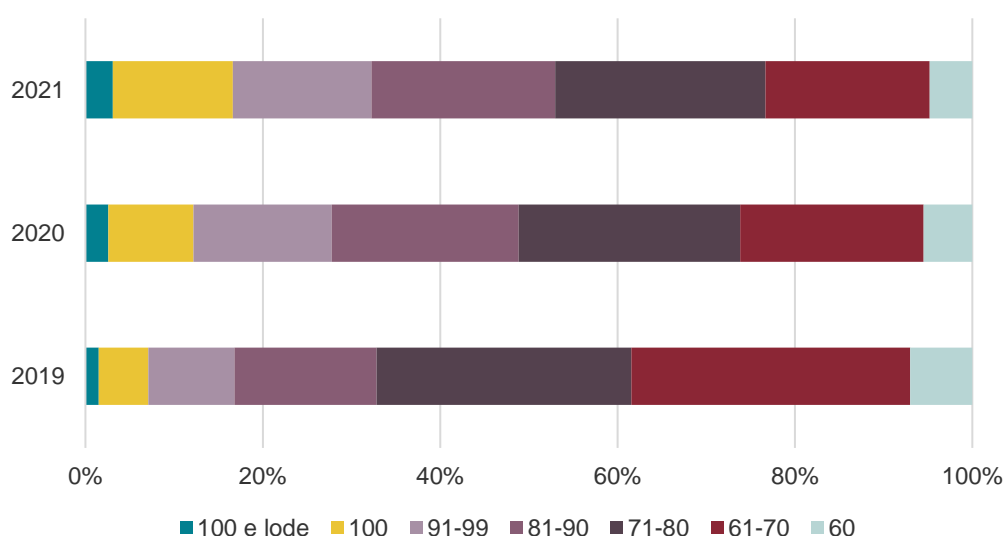
School closures continued into the 2020–21 academic year for many areas, and following public pressure, a decision was taken by the Ministry of Education to cancel the 2021 written

examinations. Italian students created a petition supporting the cancellation of written exams and citing the examples of the UK and France, which collected 65,000 signatures.¹¹⁹ As in the 2019–20 academic year, final-year grades were based on one oral assessment and ongoing internal teacher assessments. In addition, five additional points were made available by the Examining Board to candidates who scored at least 50 points for school credits and at least 30 points in the oral exam.¹²⁰

Impact of changes to assessment

Results for 2020 and 2021¹²¹ show increases on 2019 across the four top grades (80+), with marginal increases achieved between 2020 and 2021.

Figure 8 Esame di Stato grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: Ministero dell'Istruzione

- ◆ 99.8% of all students sitting the exam achieved a pass mark in 2021, compared with 99.5% in 2020 and 2019.
- ◆ Those students graduating with distinction (*100 e lode*) increased from 1.5% of all students in 2019 to 2.6% of all students in 2020 and to 3.1% in 2021.
- ◆ Over half of all students achieved a grade above 80 in 2021, increasing from around a third of all students in 2019.

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Despite the picture presented by the exam statistics, Italy continues to experience issues within its education system as a result of structural problems. Even before the pandemic, Italy lagged behind many of its peers in educational rankings and suffers from one of the highest early school-leaver rates in the European Union.

The COVID crisis, which saw schools closed for large parts of the past two years and assessments adjusted, has led to an increase in the number of students no longer attending or participating in school. In January 2021, a report¹²² by Save the Children, Italy noted 28% of teenagers aged 14 to 18 said that at least one classmate had completely disappeared

from online lessons, while 38% said the learning experience during lockdown had been a negative one.

Media coverage suggests that although the public largely welcomed the internal school assessment and oral assessments, there is widespread concern among teachers and parents over the significant learning loss,¹²³ particularly in the country's less developed and economically poorer areas.¹²⁴ Social commentary suggests that the pandemic and subsequent changes to education and assessments have made structural issues and divisions in educational attainment worse.

Netherlands

Context

The school leaving examination for secondary education in the Netherlands consists of a school examination and a national written examination at the end of the final school year.¹²⁵ Dutch, English and Mathematics are core subjects.

Schools also set their own exams. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science prescribes which subjects must be taught during the exam year. The school examination dates are not nationally fixed: schools are free to test pupils in particular subjects whenever they wish. The school exam usually comprises two or more tests per subject, which may be oral, practical or written.¹²⁶

There is one national written exam per subject. The national exam always takes place at the end of the final year and is compiled by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science.¹²⁷

The headteacher is responsible for determining each candidate's final marks. The final mark in each subject is the average of the mark for the school exam and the mark for the national exam. To obtain a leaving certificate, a candidate must have scored pass marks in a specified number of subjects.¹²⁸

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

In 2020, the national examination was cancelled. School leavers' grades were based solely on their school exams.¹²⁹

In 2021, national exams went ahead, but with some adaptations. In December 2020 the government announced¹³⁰ that, even though there was a lockdown in the Netherlands, exam candidates would continue to take lessons at school.

*In the interests of students, I have decided to let the central exam continue, but I will take measures that give students the best possible starting position in terms of time, flexibility, compensation and equality of opportunity.*¹³¹

While the minister announced measures such as candidates being able to spread their exams over two periods, more time for teaching and learning, and candidates being allowed to re-sit two subjects later in the summer, he emphasised that he did not want to see changes to the breadth of the curriculum being assessed.¹³²

Later, the government also announced that candidates would be able to exclude the grade of one (non-core) subject from their results.¹³³

Impact of changes to assessment

In 2020, the Netherlands recorded a higher pass rate after its central exams were cancelled.¹³⁴ A survey by the newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* found almost five times as many high schools as usual reported a 100% pass rate. The education ministry has rejected claims that the high pass rate meant the exams had been devalued.¹³⁵

In 2021, pass rates were also higher than before the pandemic, despite the fact that the national exam took place. They were, however, slightly lower than in 2020.¹³⁶

The higher success rate is likely due to the opportunity to repeat the final exam two or, in some cases, three times instead of once [...] The possibility of spreading the final exams over two periods of ten days and the opportunity to drop the grade from one core subject could also have played a role.¹³⁷

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

In announcing that the 2021 national exams would go ahead, the minister for education stated that there was agreement from almost all parties on the importance of the central examination,¹³⁸ notwithstanding the fact that different parties had different views on mitigation measures.

As noted above, there was media coverage about the rise in the pass rate, particularly in 2020 when the central national examination was cancelled.

New Zealand

Context

The New Zealand Ministry of Education oversees education, while the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) administers the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), which is the main qualification available to young people on completion of secondary education. It is a credit-based qualification, available at three levels — Levels 1, 2 and 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. Most NCEA courses begin in Year 11 — the final year of compulsory education for 15- to 16-year-olds — and most Year 11 students follow NCEA courses Level 1, progressing to Level 2 in Year 12, and Level 3 in Year 13.¹³⁹

Each year, students study a number of courses or subjects. In each subject, skills and knowledge are assessed against a number of standards. To measure the levels to which standards are met, ongoing assessments consist of internal teacher assessed tests and externally-assessed computer-delivered examinations. When a student achieves a standard, they gain a number of credits. Students must achieve a certain number of credits to gain an NCEA certificate.¹⁴⁰

The NCEA is intended for all students, whether they are hoping to go on to university, are planning to do an apprenticeship, or want to learn practical skills and get a job after leaving school. It aims to offer young people the flexibility to study a range of courses and subjects. Eighty credits are required at any level to achieve the NCEA. Credits at one level can count towards a higher level. A minimum of 60 credits must be achieved at Level 3 to achieve the highest standard of NCEA. Students are recognised for high achievement at each level by gaining NCEA with Merit or NCEA with Excellence.¹⁴¹

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

In 2020, teaching, learning and assessment were disrupted as a result of the COVID-19 threat, including four weeks of school closure over the March/April period, and further restrictions of two weeks in August in the Auckland region.

As a result of the closures, some adjustments were made to assessments in New Zealand in the 2020 academic year.¹⁴² Additional credits (learner recognition credits or LRCs) were awarded to students, with variances for those students located in Auckland.¹⁴³

- ◆ Students in Auckland earned one additional credit for every four credits achieved through internal or external assessment. Potentially students were able to achieve an additional 16 credits at Level 1 and 12 additional credits at Levels 2 and 3.
- ◆ Students outside of Auckland earned one additional credit for every five credits achieved through internal or external assessment. Potentially students were able to achieve an additional 10 credits at Level 1 and eight additional credits in Levels 2 and 3.

University entrance requirements were reduced from 14 to 12 credits in three university entrance-approved subjects for all students. It was still necessary to attain NCEA Level 3 and meet literacy and numeracy requirements to be awarded university entrance.¹⁴⁴

In addition, the New Zealand Government provided a NZ\$14.5M Urgent Response Fund for the Auckland region. The funding was for schools and services to hire additional staff to support students and provide catch-up tuition during the 2020 academic year.¹⁴⁵

In the 2021 academic year the disruption to learning and assessments became more widespread. As in 2020, there were changes to credits awarded, with one additional credit for every four credits gained for students in Auckland and one additional credit for every five credits gained for students outside of Auckland. The number of credits required to achieve course endorsement, certificate endorsement, and university entrance was also reduced for students located in Auckland. Students located outside of Auckland who faced additional significant disruption (attendance at school disrupted for a certain number of days and/or as a result of illness/COVID-19), were eligible for a reduction in the required number of credits.¹⁴⁶

Credits awarded for the 2021 academic year were calculated on all the credits achieved during 2021, including credits earned before lockdowns and those in the final summer assessments. In addition, there were changes to assessment dates for all students, with the term extended and exams moved back two weeks, shortening the summer break. These changes were to give students and schools more time to prepare for the end of the year.¹⁴⁷

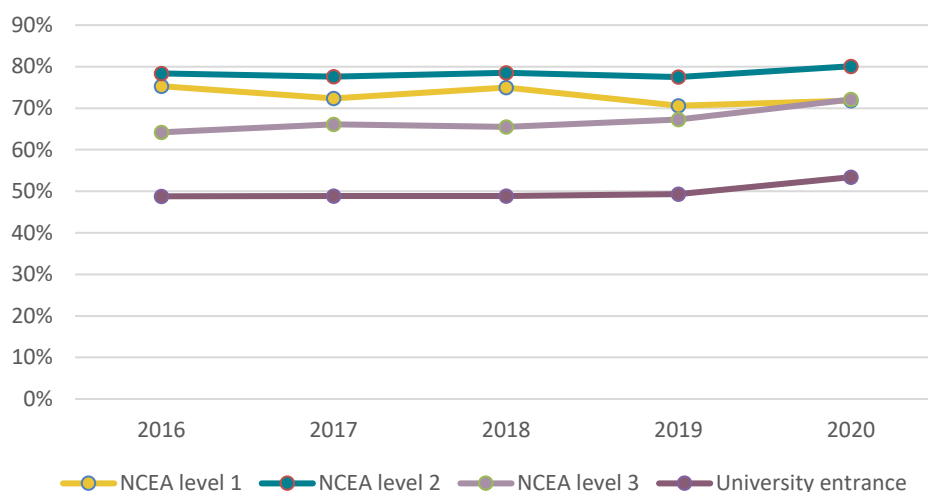
If students were unable to sit the final-year assessments, or missed any other elements needed to calculate final credits, the school provided NZQA with grades from valid standard-specific evidence, which were used for a derived grade.

The awarding body, NZQA, stated that the NCEA achieved or university entrance awarded in 2021 was to be regarded as the same as one achieved in any other year, allowing students progression to the next level of study.¹⁴⁸

Impact of changes to assessment

The data in Figure 13, published by NZQA,¹⁴⁹ highlight student achievement from 2016 to 2020. There was a rise in the proportion of students achieving NCEA in 2020 compared to 2019.

Figure 9 NCEA attainment, 2016–20



Enrolment-based attainment rates of Year 11 to 13 students attaining NCEA levels 1–3 and university entrance.

Source: NZQA

The NZQA noted that caution should be exercised when comparing 2020 attainment data with previous years' results.¹⁵⁰

The majority of schools and students were reportedly content with the overall results, but some school representatives suggested that as many as one in ten students would not have passed the NCEA under 'normal' pre-COVID circumstances.

NZQA has not yet released the 2021 attainment data.¹⁵¹

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Public perceptions and reactions to the changes in assessment across New Zealand varied. While many students and their parents were relieved that additional credits were allocated to students to mitigate lost learning during lockdowns, there was some resentment of the perceived unfairness of the system, with concerns raised over Auckland students receiving additional allocation of credits for assessments compared with counterparts in other areas of the country.¹⁵²

Concerns were also raised over the two-week extension to the 2021 academic year. Students cited additional stress, damage to mental health, and a lack of motivation to study for assessments as a result of the shorter post-exam Christmas break. Others were disappointed and angry about a lack of consultation on the decision. A number of petitions circulated, including one to reduce the number of credits required to achieve the NCEA, and another to remove the two-week assessment extension.

Northern Ireland

Context

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) oversees examinations and assessment, alongside the curriculum, and keeps assessment arrangements under review. Awarding organisations design qualifications in line with regulatory requirements set by the CCEA.¹⁵³

GCSEs are available from a range of awarding organisations recognised by CCEA. Individual schools choose the GCSE qualifications to offer to their students from those available from the awarding organisations, and may choose to offer GCSEs from different awarding organisations for different subjects.

GCSEs in Northern Ireland were reformed during the period 2015–18.

- ◆ Schools in Northern Ireland can offer GCSEs which continue to use the A*–G grading system for GCSEs developed by the CCEA awarding organisation. These are awarded alongside GCSEs developed by awarding organisations in England that are now graded using the numerical 1–9 system.
- ◆ Schools remain free to choose between modular (unitised) GCSEs (where examinations can be taken throughout the two years of the course), which have been discontinued in England from September 2012, and linear GCSEs (where assessment is through examinations taken only at the end of the two-year period).
- ◆ Where GCSEs are modular, pupils only have one opportunity to retake each unit, and 40% of the assessment must take place at the end of the course.

All A and AS levels must comply with CCEA's criteria which cover assessment design and delivery, and the determination and issuing of results. Individual schools and colleges choose the A level and AS level qualifications to offer to their students from those available from the awarding organisations. They may choose to offer A and AS levels from different awarding organisations, in Northern Ireland, England or Wales, for different subjects.¹⁵⁴

AS level passes are graded on a five-point scale: A, B, C, D, E (where A is high). There is a six-point scale for A level passes: A*, A, B, C, D, E. The grade U denotes a fail.

A Level and AS level qualifications in Northern Ireland were reformed during the period 2015–18.

- ◆ Where AS levels contribute to the overall mark for the full A level, they account for 40% of the total mark, compared to 50% previously. (In England, all AS levels are now standalone qualifications and do not contribute to the overall mark for the full A level qualification.)
- ◆ AS level examinations can be taken either at the end of the AS course or alongside the units taken at the end of the full A level course. (In England, AS and A levels are now linear qualifications, with all examinations taken at the end of the course.)
- ◆ Where A/AS levels in Northern Ireland are modular (or unitised), units can be retaken by students only once.

Assessment of GCSEs, A levels, and AS levels is mainly by timed, written examinations. For some subjects, the final grade awarded may be based partly on non-examination assessment. This is usually a form of internal ('controlled') assessment under teacher supervision.

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

As with the other nations of the UK, exams in Northern Ireland were cancelled in both 2020 and 2021.

Initially in 2020, Northern Ireland put in place a system where schools submitted their predicted grades for students, which were then standardised by CCEA through the use of an algorithm. There was widespread concern¹⁵⁵ about this process after the publication of results in August 2020, echoing similar concerns in Scotland, England, and Wales. Consequently, it was announced that students would instead be awarded whichever grade was higher, that of their teacher prediction or the one awarded by CCEA.

In 2021, schools in Northern Ireland calculated GCSE, AS, and A level grades, with CCEA then quality assuring these grades to 'ensure fairness and consistency'. There was no statistical standardisation using an algorithm. The Education Minister suggested that this would give more weight to the professional judgement of teachers.¹⁵⁶

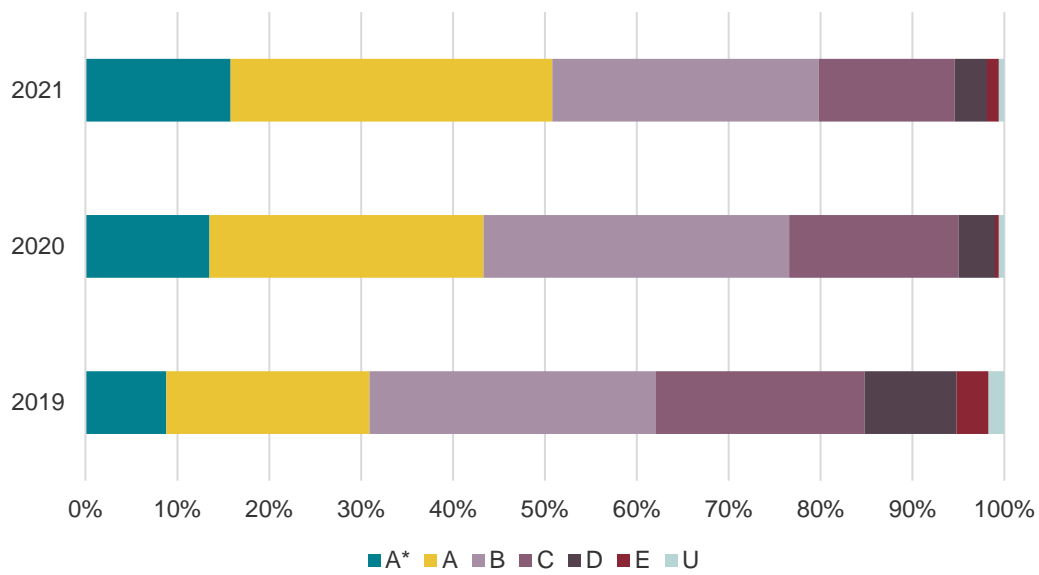
CCEA made available to schools and colleges assessment resources to be used as part of the broad portfolio of evidence, including repurposed papers and mark schemes. The government stressed that these tests were not exams and should not be treated as such.

Impact of changes to assessment

As the means of determining grades in 2020 and 2021 were different to any other year, it is possibly unsurprising that grade distributions also differed. Care should be taken when comparing 2020 and 2021 distributions with previous years.

At A level in 2021, 15.8% of Northern Ireland candidates achieved the top A* grade, a 2.3pp increase from 2020. A*-A grade also increased by 7.5pp to 50.8%. However, at grades A*-E, there was a 0.4pp decrease between 2020 and 2021.

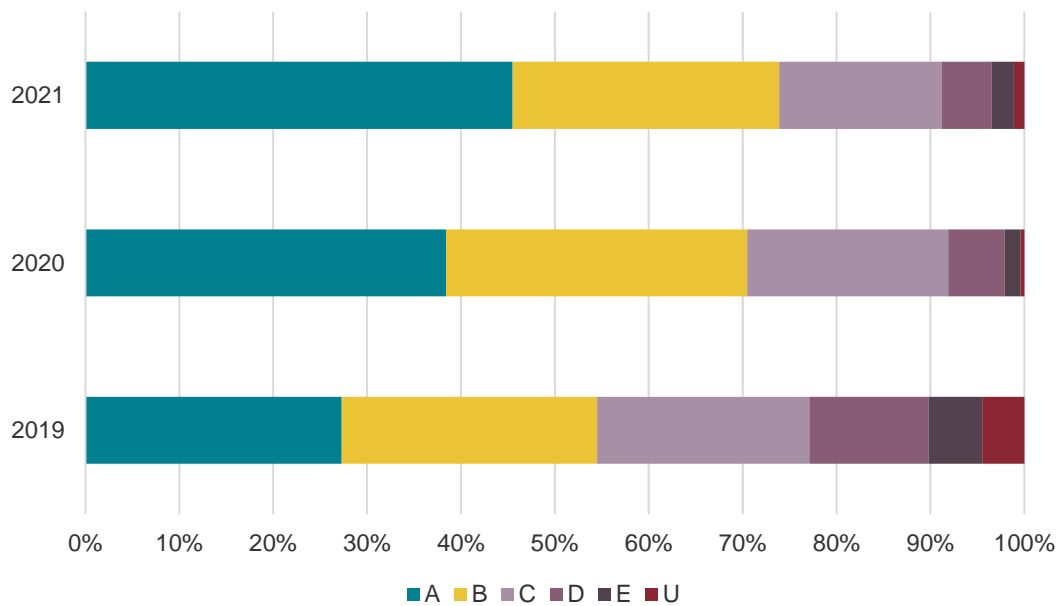
Figure 10 Northern Ireland A level grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

At AS level, similarly to A level, there was an increase at the top grades (A grades increased by 7.1pp from 2020 to 2021) but a small decrease in the overall proportion of grades A–E (from 99.6% in 2020 to 98.9% in 2021).

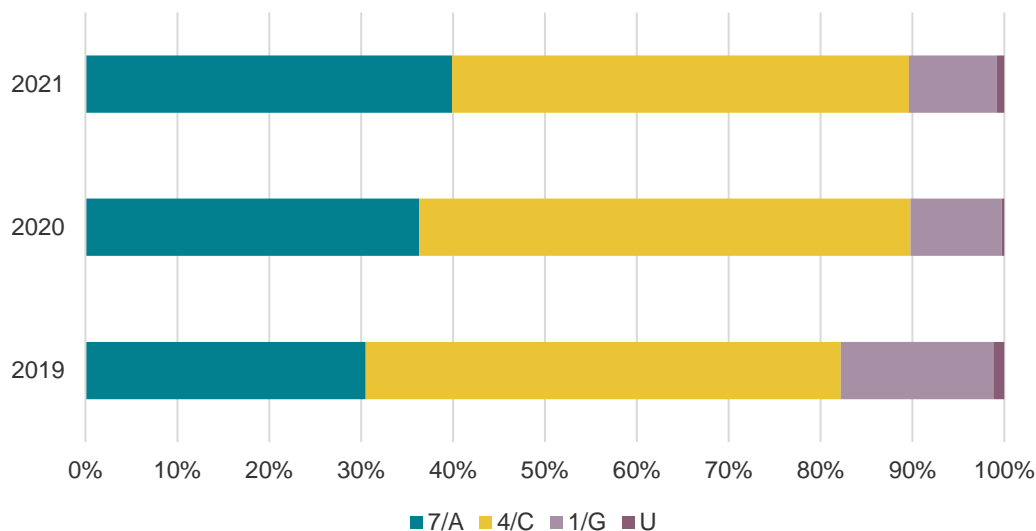
Figure 11 Northern Ireland AS level grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

Meanwhile, at GCSE, the proportion of entries awarded grade A/7 increased by 3.6pp to 39.9% between 2020 and 2021. The number of entries, however, achieving A/7–C/4 remained stable between 2020 and 2021.

Figure 12 Northern Ireland GCSE grade distributions 2019–21



Source: JCQ

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

The controversy in Northern Ireland following the initial release of results in August 2020 centred on the perceived unfairness of the process and the use of statistical standardisation. This led to the reversal of the decision to use an algorithm and to the use of teachers' predictions instead.

Headlines across the two years highlighted the increase in the proportion of top grades awarded.¹⁵⁷ However, researchers have suggested that this uplift was not uniform, and the gap between those pupils who receive free school meals and those who do not widened at A level, and very possibly at GCSE.^{158,159}

We [...] see that the increase for non-FSME pupils exceeded the increase for FSME pupils by two percentage points, widening the attainment gap by as much.¹⁶⁰

Norway

Context

In assessing its school students, Norway deploys a mixed economy of internal and external assessment. In upper-secondary education, assessment is predominantly the responsibility of the teacher, who contributes over 80% of the overall marks. The only cohort-based central examination is in Norwegian. In other subjects, both centrally- and locally- (often practical or oral) devised examinations are administered to a sample of students chosen through the exam lottery. The exam lottery means that students are not examined in every subject but instead prepare for exams in the subjects in which the exam is a possible final assessment in addition to the marks awarded for classwork. This involves around 20% of students in a subject, with all students in both upper secondary 1 and 2 taking one such exam and in upper secondary 3 taking two as well as one oral, practical, or combined practical and oral exam. Each of these contributes to the final certificate. Students find out which subject they may be examined in only a day before the examination.^{161,162}

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

Norway closed schools in March 2020 and cancelled written and oral examinations at the end of upper and lower secondary education, prioritising learning time over exam preparation during closures. Instead of examinations, school-based assessments of students' performance across the school year informed all final grades. At upper secondary level, students who passed all subjects would receive a diploma enabling them to apply to higher education.¹⁶³ (Examinations were maintained for candidates from outside the formal school system and in higher education, where continuous assessment is less embedded, but via flexible methods which respected social distancing.) The setting of an overall achievement grade in the absence of local and national exams meant that certificates were marked with 'Exam cancelled for students in spring 2020 due to coronavirus'.¹⁶⁴

*Norway decided to cancel most national exams for the last year of junior high as well as high school. The Ministry of Education has announced that instead, schools will provide more continuous assessment so that the teachers will have the best possible foundation for setting grades. The priority is given to make sure that every student graduates and can continue his or her education (ie higher education). As continuous assessment is widely used throughout the year, it is not new to teachers.*¹⁶⁵

In February 2021 Norway again cancelled all of its written exams and most of its oral exams. The reason for this was the continued disruption associated with COVID and, in particular, the different amounts and quality of teaching and learning that different learners had received.¹⁶⁶

However, the government announcement emphasised that they were keen in 2021 to maintain some form of external assessment:

The grades the students receive must be correct and fair, as far as possible. It is good for both the individual student and the other students you compete against in the admission to upper secondary education and higher education. When we now have to cancel the written exam, it is

*therefore important that we look at other possibilities for an external assessment, in addition to adding extra support.*¹⁶⁷

The minister suggested that exams are an important part of the assessment system and the need to treat all graduating students equally and provide them all with an external assessment outweighed other considerations.¹⁶⁸ Those in Year 10 (the end of lower secondary) and in upper secondary 3, then, were scheduled to sit locally-devised exams which were to be externally assessed by an external examiner. However, in response to concerns from the education sector regarding workload, these plans were subsequently cancelled.^{169,170}

Impact of changes to assessment

The consequences of the cancellation of exams in Norway in 2020 and 2021 were not dramatic, as exams count for 20% of the final grade, with teachers' assessment counting for 80%. Grades were issued without major disruption.¹⁷¹

With regard to the situation in Norway, Ofqual suggested that:

*With only 20 percent of marks based on final exams, the consequences of cancelling them appear manageable.*¹⁷²

However, despite this relatively straightforward pivot to Norway's grades being based solely on teachers' continuous assessment, grade point averages have increased since before the pandemic.

*In 2019–20, the increase was particularly large compared with previous years. Overall, the average grade for all common subjects with at least 50 students has increased from 4.1 before the pandemic (2018–19), to 4.2 last year (2019–20). The grade point average is 4.2 again this year (2020–21).*¹⁷³

It was suggested that the causes of the increase are complex, but may include the use of different assessment methods, students' peace of mind in the absence of exams, and teachers giving students the benefit of the doubt.¹⁷⁴

A report into the increase in grade point average between 2018–19 and 2019–20 found that increases were not evenly distributed across subjects and were greatest in academic and theoretical, rather than more practical or vocational, subjects. Moreover, the increase in grade point average was largely due to an increase in students receiving higher grades, rather than fewer students receiving the 'not assessed' grade.^{175,176}

A government press release said that developments in the grade point average would be monitored¹⁷⁷ but that results from several countries showed the same trends of grade inflation or increased pass rates.¹⁷⁸

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Pre-existing resources and conditions in the education system facilitated areas of Norway's initial response to the pandemic. The ongoing focus on low-stakes assessment, continuous evaluation, and assessment for learning enabled decisions regarding national examinations to be taken swiftly and with minimal disruption.¹⁷⁹ The cancellation of exams in 2020 and 2021 appears to have been widely welcomed as a necessary step given the ongoing

pandemic. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that, even with Norway's focus on teacher assessment, the government had attempted to retain an element of external assessment in 2021, albeit unsuccessfully.

There were some concerns about the children of immigrants in Norway being disproportionately affected by learning disruption throughout COVID. This is part of a wider issue encompassing low socio-economic status, lack of access to a quiet place to study, lack of access to digital resources and support, parents with lower education and limited understanding of the education system, and language barriers. All these factors impact on assessment when learning and teaching is undertaken remotely.¹⁸⁰

Ontario

Context

Teacher assessment is the basis of certification in Ontario. Assessment of upper-secondary school pupils in Ontario comprises 70% teacher continuous assessment and 30% teacher-devised examination. Teachers determine a student's course marks and make summative subject assessments which are the basis of graduation.¹⁸¹ There are no province-wide subject exams.

(The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) is responsible for Ontario's provincial assessment programme. These tests assess literacy and maths skills and proficiency. They also co-ordinate Ontario's participation in international assessments. <https://www.eqao.com/the-assessments/>)

Upper-secondary school students generally follow a programme leading to the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). This requires students to achieve 30 credits, while students gaining over 14 credits can leave school with the Ontario Secondary School Certificate (OSSC). A credit is awarded for a mark of over 50% on a course. Of the 30 credits for the Diploma, 18 are in compulsory subjects (English, Mathematics, Science, Health and Physical Education, Career Studies or Civics), while the other 12 come from a range of options. Students also need to complete 40 hours of community involvement activities and are required to pass the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT). It is a school's choice whether the OSSLT marks contribute towards the Diploma.¹⁸²

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

Assessment in Ontario is largely decentralised and therefore can be flexible. Ontario was able to adapt relatively easily to school closures and examination cancellation.

*In Ontario, which also experienced school lockdowns, the assessment problems were less acute as the system relies largely on teacher assessment.*¹⁸³

When schools were closed teachers typically used grades from pre-closure periods. The pre-closure grades or pass/fail judgements were solely based on teachers' classroom assessment.¹⁸⁴

Impact of changes to assessment

The Ontario Ministry of Education publishes graduation rates, showing the proportion of students who achieve an OSSD within four or five years of starting grade 9. In 2019, 87.2% of students were graduating in five years and 81.4% in four years. In 2020, 88.1% of students were graduating in five years and 82.2% in four years.¹⁸⁵ The graduation rates for 2021 have not yet been published.

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Concerns in Ontario centre on the impact of remote learning itself rather than changes to the methods of assessment.^{186,187} Ontario's school closures were some of the longest in Canada and, unlike in other provinces, their literacy and numeracy assessments were cancelled for two years.¹⁸⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant education disruption in Ontario. This has included mass and localized school closures, multiple models of educational provision and gaps in support for students with disabilities. The unequal distribution of school closures and pandemic-associated hardships, particularly affecting low-income families in which racialized and Indigenous groups, newcomers and people with disabilities are overrepresented, appear to be deepening and accelerating inequities in education outcomes, wherever data have been collected.¹⁸⁹

Queensland

Context

Queensland Government Department of Education is responsible for education within the state of Queensland, while the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) is responsible for testing, assessment, moderation, certification, and vocational education and training services to Queensland's education community.

Queensland traditionally provided a good example of a wholly teacher-driven examination system. However, since 2020 there has been a small shift towards external assessments, with 25% of an upper secondary student's assessments being graded externally.¹⁹⁰

The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE)¹⁹¹ is Queensland's senior school qualification, awarded to eligible students, usually at the end of Year 12. It is offered not only in schools, but also through Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE), distance learning, and at several Education Queensland centres. To be eligible for a QCE, students must achieve 20 credits by completing the set amount of learning, to the set standard, in a set pattern, while meeting literacy and numeracy requirements. Although QCE is an internationally recognised qualification, from 2020, to apply for university a student must also achieve a satisfactory Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) score. The Queensland Tertiary and Admissions Centre (QTAC) is responsible for calculating students' ATAR scores for entry into university.

Before 2020, the Overall Position (OP) was the primary pathway for tertiary entrance for Year 12 school leavers in Queensland. The QCAA calculated OPs. The OP showed a student's position in a state-wide rank compared to all other OP-eligible students in Queensland. Since 2020, Queensland's standard pathway to tertiary entry for Year 12 school leavers is the ATAR. ATARs are calculated by comparing student results using a process known as 'inter-subject scaling', as used in several other Australian states.¹⁹²

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

During the initial lockdown of 2020 schools provided an alternative to classroom-based learning in term two by means of online learning. Online portals were used to communicate with students during the four-week lockdown in April and May 2020. At the same time, schools prepared for the transition to a different learning model from 2020, introducing the external assessment element.

As a result of the interruption to learning for students, the decision was taken by the Queensland Government Department of Education to reduce the number of assessments students had to complete for each subject from four to three. This equated to one external and two internal assessments undertaken by each Queensland student. This did not impact on the calculation of the ATAR, which was carried out as normal using the Year 12's final QCE result received from the QCAA in December 2020.¹⁹³

There was one state-wide lockdown during the 2021 academic year, but short-term snap local lockdown restrictions were applied across Queensland at various times. Assessments went ahead as scheduled,¹⁹⁴ with the return of the standard four assessments for each subject.

Impact of changes to assessment

The introduction of the new QCE system in 2019 involved changes to the QCAA's curriculum, assessment and certification policies and procedures.¹⁹⁵ Data on the 2020 cohort's attainment cannot be compared with the attainment of previous cohorts. Data on the attainment of the 2021 cohort is not yet available.

Table 3 shows achievement in 2020 external assessments for general, as opposed to applied, subjects, which prepare students for tertiary study, further education, training, and work.

Table 3 Year 12 QCE general subject external examination results 2020

Entries	A	B	C	D	E
156,197	22.2%	39.7%	33.5%	4.6%	0.1%

Source: QCAA

Even though we cannot compare 2020 levels of attainment with previous years, QCAA data show that in 2020 91% of students who completed Year 12 in Queensland were awarded a QCE. This is a lower proportion than in previous years.¹⁹⁶

Table 4 Year 12 QCE awards, 2016–20

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
QCE awards	48,653	50,219	49,334	35,620	45,188
Proportion of Year 12s	94%	94%	95%	94%	91%

Source: QCAA

Given the changes to the way assessments were undertaken in 2020, moving from wholly internal assessments to a split between internal and external assessments, it is not straightforward to quantify the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown disruption.

Research suggested that as many as 30% of Queensland students located in the remoter areas of the region were without internet access,¹⁹⁷ impacting negatively on their experience of learning during lockdown. A survey of teachers and school leaders in Australia conducted by Pivot and Education Perfect¹⁹⁸ found that 80% believed students would need extra instructional support on returning to school, with the top three concerns being social isolation, a decrease in student wellbeing, and learning loss.

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Concerns in Queensland appear to centre on the wider effects of COVID-19 rather than specifically on the impacts of changes to assessment and certification.

Singapore

Context

While teachers in Singapore perform continuous assessment of their students at all levels of education, it is still an exam-oriented culture with high-stakes assessments.¹⁹⁹ In 2019, the government removed exams at lower levels, hoping to shift the focus from grades and rote learning to a model emphasising creativity and engagement, and incorporating more formative assessment.²⁰⁰

At the secondary level, students take subject-based GCE exams. After four years of study, students take O-level exams in the Express, and N-level exams in the Normal (Technical) programme. Students in the Normal (Academic) programme can take the N-level exams after four years of study or the O-level exams after five years. Students who wish to study at university take A level exams after an additional two years of study.²⁰¹

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

After an incremental and adaptive approach to school management in February and March 2020, Singapore moved to a home-based model in April. Face-to-face learning resumed as soon as the first wave of COVID was over. The government's agile policy response, including blended learning and moving school holidays forward, meant that Singapore successfully provided a high number of school days to its students.²⁰² The government continued to adopt a targeted approach to deal with COVID infections within schools and resisted calls to move wholesale to remote learning again.²⁰³

Exams take place in September, October, and November and, in both 2020 and 2021, proceeded as planned with additional safety measures in place. These measures included temperature screening, the wearing of masks, and candidates being at least 1.5 m apart.²⁰⁴

*National examinations are important milestones that affect students' educational progression.*²⁰⁵

Those candidates who had been in close contact with COVID were allowed to sit their exams if they tested negative for COVID. Those who had COVID or who were subject to a quarantine or stay-at-home order could not sit their exams.

*Candidates who miss the national examinations with valid reasons can apply for special consideration. In awarding a grade for these affected candidates, SEAB will consider multiple sources of evidence, such as the candidate's performance in the other papers and the school cohort's performance in national and school-based examinations for the affected subject, to ensure a fair assessment. All special consideration applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis and subjected to a rigorous review process.*²⁰⁶

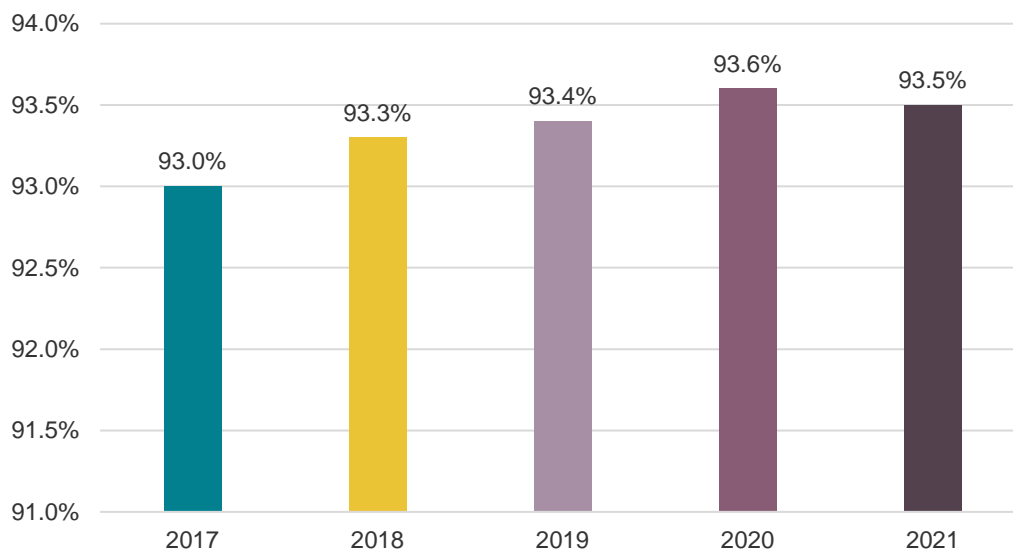
For candidates who missed full papers (ie all components) in their subject, SEAB took into consideration the candidate's school preliminary examination results to determine his or her relative rank position among peers in the school cohort. This relative rank position was then used to derive the candidate's projected mark from the school cohort's performance.²⁰⁷

For candidates who missed one or more component papers, SEAB looked at the candidate's performance in the papers they had taken, to derive a projected outcome for the subject, but also took into consideration the candidate's performance in the school preliminary examination.²⁰⁸

Impact of changes to assessment

Singapore's national examinations have gone ahead despite the pandemic, and there have not been changes to assessment. Results for 2020 and 2021 are in line with recent years.^{209,210}

Figure 13 Proportion of students attaining at least three H2 passes at GCE A level, 2017–21



Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Although primary-level exams were cancelled, Singapore's national examinations went ahead with some adaptations and arrangements in place due to COVID-19. This seems to have attracted little controversy.

Scotland

Context

Pupils in upper secondary education in schools and colleges may take a number of National Courses leading to external National Qualifications — including National 2–5, Higher and Advanced Higher. National Qualifications are single-subject qualifications available in a wide range of subjects. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) is the national awarding and accreditation body for Scotland and is responsible for National Qualifications.²¹¹

For National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher, course assessment is normally based on an examination component and a coursework component. The assessment methods used to assess different forms of coursework are:

- ◆ assignments
- ◆ case studies
- ◆ performance
- ◆ portfolio
- ◆ practical activities and projects

The final grade for these National Courses is based on a combination of the mark for the question paper and the mark for the coursework component, weighted as appropriate.

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

No exams took place in 2020 and 2021.

In 2020, teachers and lecturers submitted estimated grades to SQA, based on student performance throughout the course. Schools and colleges also submitted an estimated band within the grade, and rank order for students within each grade band for each subject. These grades were then moderated by SQA, with appeals invited where grades had been lowered during moderation but centres had evidence that backed up the higher grade. After concerns were expressed about the grades awarded, students whose results were downgraded in the SQA moderation process were re-issued with the grades submitted by their teachers.²¹²

In 2021, an alternative model was used, based on teacher judgement, supported by assessment resources and quality assurance. This alternative certification model (ACM) was developed by the National Qualifications 2021 Group, which comprised the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Colleges Scotland, Education Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), School Leaders Scotland (SLS), the Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), SQA, the Scottish Government, National Parent Forum of Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament. The ACM was centred on demonstrated attainment, so SQA asked teachers and lecturers to gather evidence under controlled conditions to ensure a degree of equity. There was no requirement to replicate full formal exams. Most schools and colleges spread assessments over the available weeks to help manage the marking and quality assurance activities and to reduce pressure on learners.²¹³

Schools and colleges assessed learner evidence, provided feedback to learners on progress, and carried out and engaged in quality assurance both internally within their centre and externally across centres. SQA sampled evidence from selected courses and centres for

national quality assurance. Schools and colleges provided learners with provisional grades in June 2021 and SQA issued certificates in August.²¹⁴

Impact of changes to assessment

In normal years, learners sit the same assessments at the same time under the same conditions, and these are marked and graded in the same way. Attainment figures in 2020 and, separately, in 2021 are derived from different awarding approaches to pre-2020. These different contexts should be borne in mind when comparing attainment rates across years.²¹⁵

In general, comparisons of grade distributions show that both the Grade A attainment rate and the A–C attainment rate for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher were substantially higher in 2020 and 2021 compared to the pre-pandemic years.

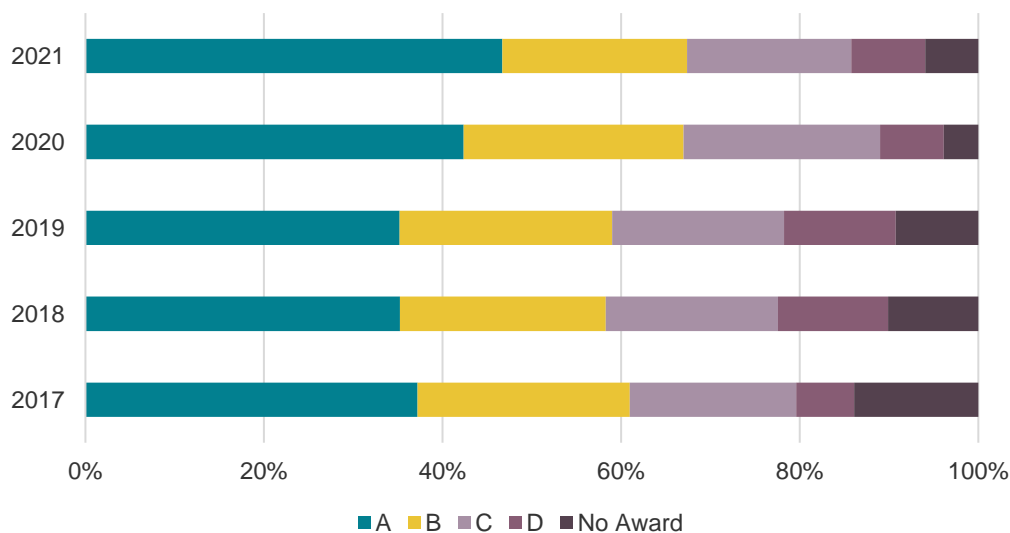
However, it is notable that while the A–C attainment rates for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher fell back slightly between 2020 and 2021, the Grade A attainment rate increased at all three levels.

Figure 1 shows National 5 grade distributions from 2017 to 2021.

The 2021 A–C attainment rate for National 5 (85.8%) is down on 2020 (89.0%) but is higher than A–C attainment rates in each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

The 2021 Grade A attainment rate for National 5 (46.7%) is up on 2020 (42.4%) and is higher than grade A attainment rate for each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

Figure 14 National 5 grade distributions, 2017–21

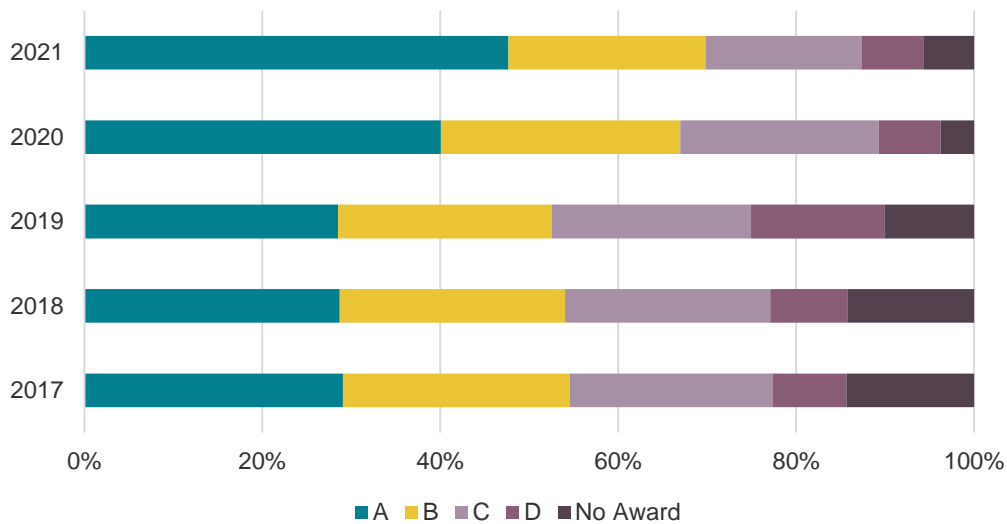


Source: SQA

Figure 2 shows Higher grade distributions from 2017 to 2021.

The 2021 A–C attainment rate for Higher (87.3%) is down on 2020 (89.3%) but is higher than A–C attainment rates in each year in the period 2017 to 2019. The 2021 Grade A attainment rate for Higher (47.7%) is up on 2020 (40.1%) and is higher than grade A attainment rate for each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

Figure 15 Higher grade distributions, 2017–21

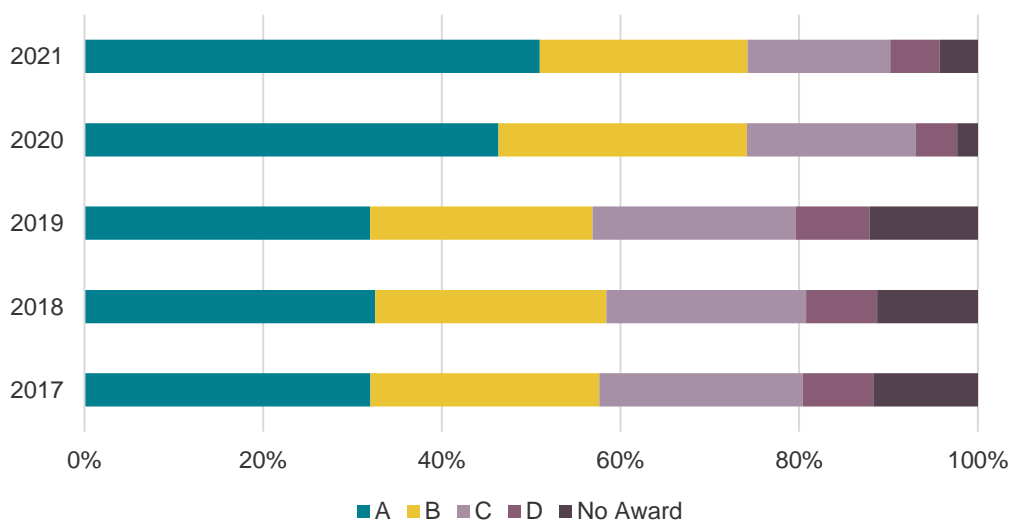


Source: SQA

Figure 3 shows Advanced Higher grade distributions from 2017 to 2021.

The 2021 A–C attainment rate for Advanced Higher (90.2%) is down on 2020 (93.1%) but is higher than A–C attainment rates in each year in the period 2017 to 2019. The 2021 Grade A attainment rate for Advanced Higher (51.0%) is up on 2020 (46.3%) and is higher than grade A attainment rate for each year in the period 2017 to 2019.

Figure 16 Advanced Higher grade distributions, 2017–19



Source: SQA

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

The 2020 ACM was put in place after exams were cancelled due to COVID-19. Following publication of results in August 2020, there was widespread concern that moderation using an algorithm based on centres' past performance perpetuated disparities in results between different groups of learners.

Ministers listened to the concerns of affected young people, parents and teachers about their perception of unfair results. They then directed SQA to re-issue awards which had been downgraded and to base them solely on teacher judgement, without reference to historical patterns. As a result, where a teacher estimate was adjusted down through SQA moderation, candidates instead received the grade the teacher awarded; candidates whose grades were adjusted up by the SQA retained the higher grade.²¹⁶

Professor Mark Priestley of the University of Stirling was commissioned by the Scottish Government to lead an independent review of the processes through which National Qualifications were awarded in 2020 and to make recommendations for awarding in 2021.²¹⁷

Professor Priestley's report highlighted the following issues with the 2020 certification model:

- ◆ the generation of estimates was subject to variation which impacted on reliability of assessment
- ◆ the statistical approach to moderation could have been made more transparent earlier in the process
- ◆ there was criticism of SQA for a perceived lack of transparency and a failure to engage in participative development of solutions with stakeholders
- ◆ while the application of the Post Certification Review (PCR) process offered a technical solution to address anomalies, it paid insufficient attention to the severe impact on those learners obliged to undergo it (including in terms of mental health and wellbeing and missed opportunities to transition into higher education)
- ◆ the equity implications of an over-reliance on a statistical approach, premised on comparison with historical cohort data, had been raised, but seemed to have been under-emphasised by both the government and SQA until late in the process
- ◆ many stakeholders believe that, subsequently, opportunities were missed to engage in qualitative moderation of the statistical process
- ◆ respondents reported an erosion of trust/confidence in SQA amongst teachers and young people, and damaged relations in some cases between young people and their teachers²¹⁸

*We wish to emphasise here that many of these observations are made with the benefit of hindsight; it may not have been possible to act differently, given the circumstances, and it is also not always clear that different forms of action advocated would have made a huge difference.*²¹⁹

In the lead up to 2021 certification, much of the commentary emphasised the increased workload associated with the ACM for practitioners, with some teaching unions in particular stating that the process put great strain on their members.²²⁰ Likewise, on the part of learners, there were concerns about fairness, both in terms of a perceived inconsistent application of the ACM across different centres and about the wider impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown on learning.²²¹

More recent work by SQA with learners and practitioners evaluating the ACM and exploring how it worked has captured a range of views on these issues.

The publication of 2021 results saw renewed concern about the gap between learners from low and high socio-economic backgrounds; the gap widened slightly between 2020 and 2021, although it was still narrower than before the pandemic.²²² Media coverage also focused on perceived grade inflation, particularly the increase in A grades.²²³

Wales

Context

Qualifications offered to learners under the age of 19 must be approved or designated by Qualifications Wales. Qualifications are provided by recognised awarding organisations, with the main one in Wales being WJEC.

GCSEs are available in a wide range of general/academic subjects and in some vocational/applied areas. Students typically take eight or more GCSEs in a range of subjects.

Some GCSEs in Wales are linear, with timed examinations, which are externally set and marked, taken at the end of the two-year course. Others are modular GCSEs, for which examinations take place when modules have been completed. Assessment is mainly by written examination. In some subjects, the final grade awarded is based partly on controlled assessment in addition to the examination. Controlled assessment is a form of internal assessment under teacher supervision.

Results for approved GCSEs (which are specific to Wales) are reported on an eight-point scale: A*, A, B, C, D, E, F, and G (where A* is the highest available grade). Grade C and above are classed as 'good' grades, and achieving at least a Grade C is an important influence on future pathway options available to students. Candidates who fail to reach the minimum standard for grade G are recorded as 'U' for 'unclassified' and do not receive a certificate.

In subjects where there are no approved GCSEs, students may take GCSEs designed for use in England, but designated for use in Wales. These GCSEs are graded 9 to 1 (where 9 is the highest available grade). A grade 5 is considered a 'strong pass'; a grade 4 is considered a 'standard pass'.

A level courses last two years and AS level courses last one year. A levels and AS levels are single-subject examinations, offered in a wide range of subjects. Approved A and AS levels are unique to Wales and offered only by the WJEC awarding organisation. In cases where there is no approved qualification, a qualification designed for use in England may be designated as eligible for use in Wales.

Assessment for A levels and AS level qualifications is usually by timed examinations. These are usually written but may be practical for some subjects, such as Art or Dance, and oral for languages. For some subjects, the final AS/A level grade awarded may be based partly on non-examination assessment. This is usually a form of controlled internal assessment under teacher supervision, in subjects where this is regarded as the most appropriate method of assessing content.

AS level passes are graded on a five-point scale: A, B, C, D, E (where A is high). There is a six-point scale for A level passes: A*, A, B, C, D, E. The grade U denotes a fail.²²⁴

Changes to exams and assessment in 2020 and 2021

Exams for A levels, AS levels, and GCSEs were cancelled in 2020 and 2021.

In 2020, schools and colleges were asked to provide centre assessment grades (CAGs) for each subject. This grade was intended to reflect the grade that the student would most likely have achieved if they had sat the exams. Schools and colleges were also asked to submit the rank order of students within each grade for each subject, which was used for statistical standardisation and not shared with students. Initially, students were issued the results calculated following the standardisation process. However, after the algorithm used for the original standardisation process was judged to be unfair, students were awarded the CAGs submitted by their schools if they were higher than their standardised grades.²²⁵

In 2021, the process was different. Ranking of students was not required and an algorithm was not used to standardise results nationally. Detailed guidance was issued by Qualifications Wales,²²⁶ WJEC,²²⁷ and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ).²²⁸

Learners undertaking GCSE, AS and A levels approved by Qualifications Wales had their qualifications awarded through a centre-determined grade (CDG) model. Grades were determined by their school or college, based on an assessment of the learner's work.²²⁹

As well as the need to provide high levels of flexibility to meet a wide range of individual circumstances, other key features²³⁰ of the CDG approach were:

- ◆ Holistic, best-fit judgements needed to be based on individual learner evidence of attainment, not potential, in the adapted specification content. This was so that grades were as objective as possible in the circumstances, and so that evidence of actual attainment could support any appeal about a grade judgement if required, whereas predictions of a learner's potential would always be subjective and open to challenge.
- ◆ A range of suitable evidence could be used, depending on local contexts — the quality of assessment was more important than quantity.
- ◆ Centres were urged to ensure that assessment evidence was sufficiently authentic, to allow good judgements. In the absence of exams, no fixed requirements were put in place and centres were allowed to exercise a high degree of discretion as to what assessments to use.
- ◆ Centres were allowed to exercise discretion as to the conditions of the assessments taken, ranging, for example, from assessment under controlled conditions at the centre, to unsupervised completion at home, and this could be taken into account when making judgements.
- ◆ Centres needed to develop internal quality assurance processes to improve consistency in approaches within the centre.
- ◆ Centres needed to have processes in place to consistently document the rationale for grade decisions for each learner, including any access arrangements and special considerations applied. Decision-making records needed to provide clarity for learners and parents or carers, and be able to support the appeals process.
- ◆ Centres needed to submit a head of centre declaration to WJEC, along with their centre grades, which confirmed that the grades had been determined by the centre appropriately.
- ◆ Centres would be supported to discuss their process, application of process, and outcomes, with other centres across Wales.

- ◆ WJEC would implement a programme of external quality assurance of the policies put in place and procedures undertaken at centres. This did not include quality assurance or moderation of the grades determined by centres.

Schools and colleges used a range of evidence to determine the grades awarded to their learners. In addition, the WJEC offered a set of adapted past papers which enabled schools to continue to assess learning within their teaching plans, providing extra support for teachers and learners. But there were no formal external assessments.²³¹

Qualifications Wales worked with WJEC to provide an assessment framework to support schools and colleges in developing their assessment plans. The plans needed to demonstrate sufficient coverage of key concepts to allow learners to progress, and give details of how the centre determined a learner's grade. Assessment plans were quality assured by WJEC.

Once quality assurance was completed at the centre, the grade was submitted to WJEC.

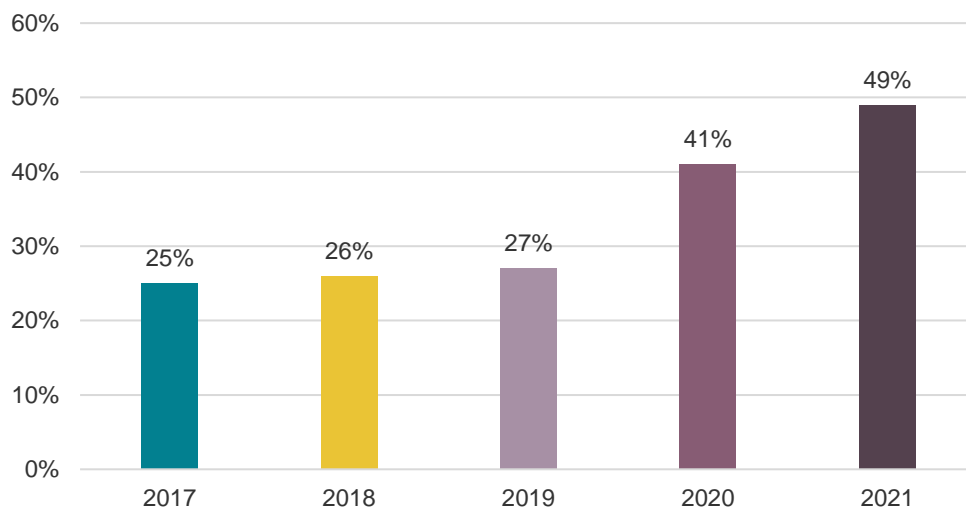
*This Centre Determined Grade approach puts trust in teachers' and lecturers' commitment to prioritise teaching and learning in the time available, and their knowledge of the quality of their learners' work.*²³²

Impact of changes to assessment

In 2020, the final results awarded to learners were arrived at in a different way to the 2021 approach. In 2020, learners received the best of the centre assessment grade (CAG) or the standardised grade. The CAG was a prediction by teachers of what the learner would have achieved had they sat their exams in summer 2020. The standardised grade had been calculated using data. Caution needs to be exercised when comparing the results in 2021 to 2020, and to 2019 and before. The results in 2021 have been awarded using a different assessment approach in different circumstances to both 2020 and previous years.²³³

In 2021, 48.3% of A level grades were A* or A grades, up 6.5pp from 2020 and up 21.3pp from 2019. How this proportion of A*–A grades compares to more typical exam years is shown in Figure 18.²³⁴

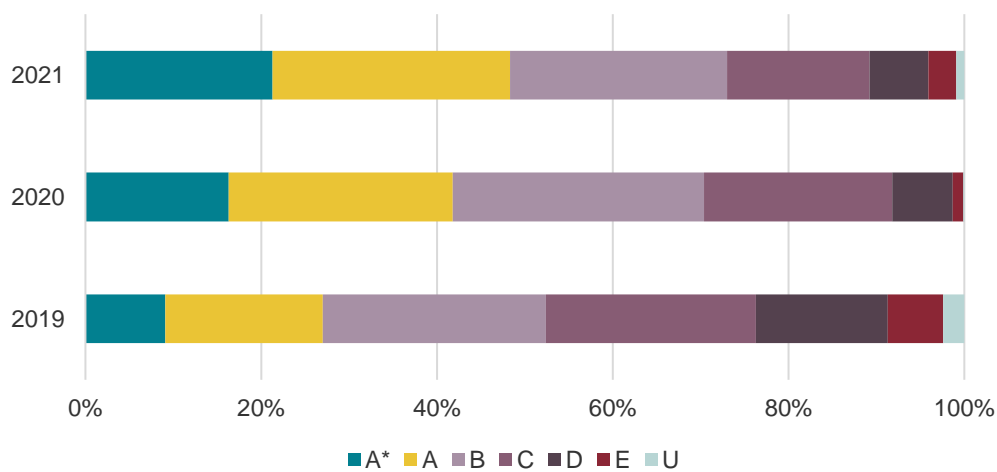
Figure 17 A level A* and A grades in Wales



Source: JCQ

Figure 19 shows Welsh A level grade distributions from 2019 to 2021.

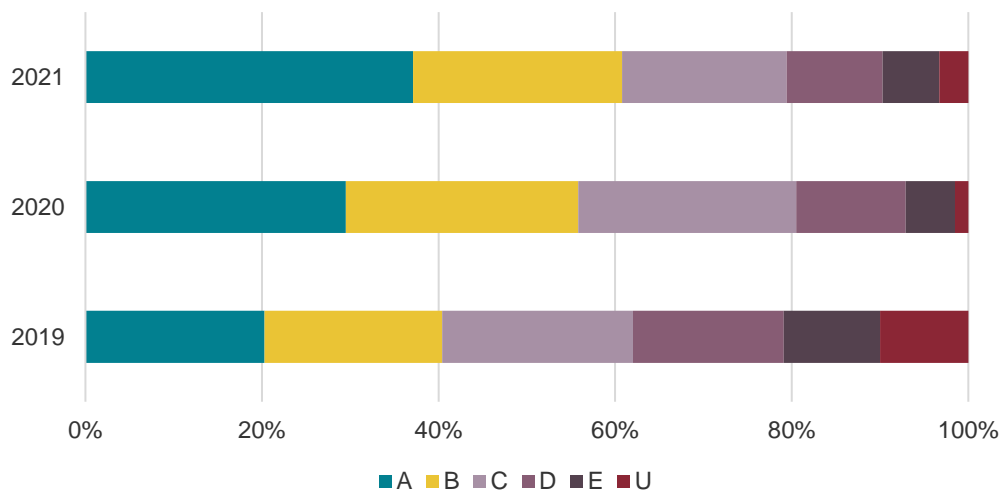
Figure 18 Welsh A level grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

In 2021, 37.1% of AS grades were A, up 7.5pp from 2020 and up 16.8pp from 2019. This increase in higher AS level outcomes is shown in the grade distribution chart (Figure 20).

Figure 19 Welsh AS level grade distributions, 2019–21

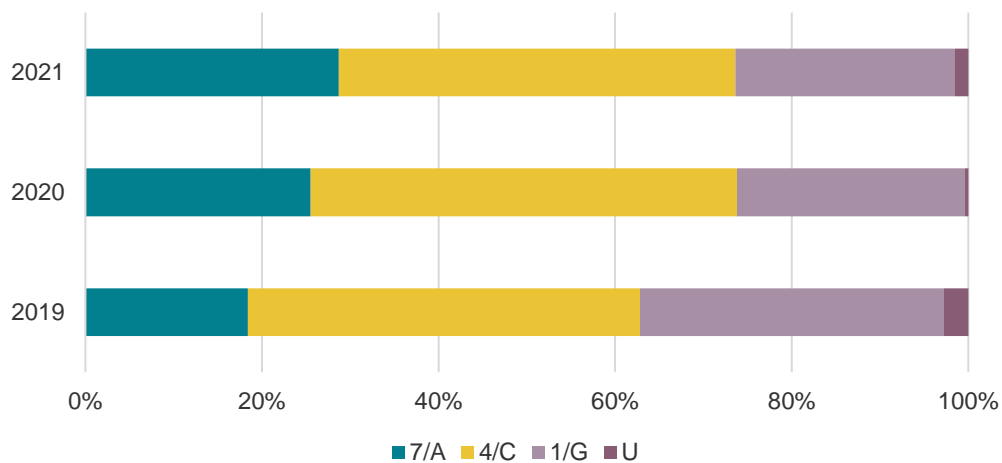


Source: JCQ

In 2021, 28.7% of GCSE grades were at least A/7, up 3.2pp from 2020 and up 10.3pp from 2019. 73.6% of GCSE grades were at least C/4, down 0.2pp from 2020 but up 10.8pp from 2019.²³⁵

The increase in higher-level outcomes is less pronounced at GCSE than at A and AS level.

Figure 20 Welsh GCSE grade distributions, 2019–21



Source: JCQ

Reaction to and public perception of responses to COVID in 2020 and 2021

Reaction to changes in assessment in Wales in both 2020 and 2021 very much echoed that in England. In 2021, there were concerns about perceived grade inflation and the widening of disparities in results between learners, particularly between those eligible for free school meals and other pupils, and between pupils with SEN and their peers.

Attainment gaps appear to have widened, giving credence to concerns that already disadvantaged pupils have been disproportionately affected by the disruption to education from coronavirus.²³⁶

Again, in common with England, there were some concerns about how grading returns to 'normal' without disadvantaging specific cohorts of learners.

Qualifications Wales had to ensure the 2020 and 2021 cohorts were not unfairly affected by the pandemic [...] but without undermining the confidence in the value of qualifications awarded. [...] Policymakers have arguably leaned towards the first aim of fairness to current cohorts in the pandemic. However, some element of realignment will likely be needed to preserve the long-term integrity of the qualifications system and restore grade currency. The challenge will be to ensure this doesn't disadvantage previous cohorts by permanently inflating grades, unfairly affect the next cohorts through a drastic return to pre-pandemic grade levels, or risk public confidence in the value of qualifications.²³⁷

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