



Approaches to certification in Scotland and other jurisdictions

High-level review of approaches to assessment and certification 2020–22

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Key findings

- ◆ Throughout the pandemic, different jurisdictions have deployed a range of assessment strategies to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, including postponing or cancelling exams, adapting and adjusting assessment, moving to school-based assessment and estimates, and going ahead with exams as scheduled.
- ◆ While the measures taken in different jurisdictions were often driven by practicability, they reflect individual jurisdictions' societal priorities and attitudes towards assessment.
- ◆ In 2022, most jurisdictions researched in this paper retained at least some modifications to assessment, including streamlining content, the provision of advance information, increased optionality, generous grading approaches, cancelling summative internal assessment, cancelling written examinations, and cancelling oral examinations.
- ◆ A number of jurisdictions will still have modifications in place in 2023 as part of a gradual return to more normal assessment and grading processes.
- ◆ The pandemic's longer-term effects on approaches to summative assessment are as yet unclear, but the experience has generated significant and widespread discussion on the future of assessment.
- ◆ While the early experiences of COVID-19 in 2020 may have exposed the weaknesses of a reliance on examinations, approaches adopted by several jurisdictions have perhaps highlighted the limitations of the alternatives.
- ◆ Fairness has emerged as a key issue, raising questions about whether the traditional concept of fairness in assessment is wide enough; there is debate about moving from impartiality to equity.
- ◆ Apparent grade inflation and changes in the distribution of grades remain across several jurisdictions and continue to cause some concern, not least in their implications for the integrity and credibility of qualifications.

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Introduction

This paper details the findings of research into how qualification assessment and certification were undertaken in a range of jurisdictions over the 2020–22 period in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. These jurisdictions include, but are not limited to, those included in the OECD's *Upper secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective*¹ published in August 2021.

This 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. This paper updates previous work² undertaken by SQA into approaches in 2020 and 2021. More detailed information on changes to exams and assessment across the range of jurisdictions in those years can be found in that paper.

Key findings from the previous paper were:

- ◆ Different jurisdictions deployed a range of assessment and certification strategies to cope with and mitigate the impact of COVID-19
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ In many jurisdictions there was 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 equity and increasing attainment gaps.
- ◆ Several jurisdictions — with quite distinct assessment systems — 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 about 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.

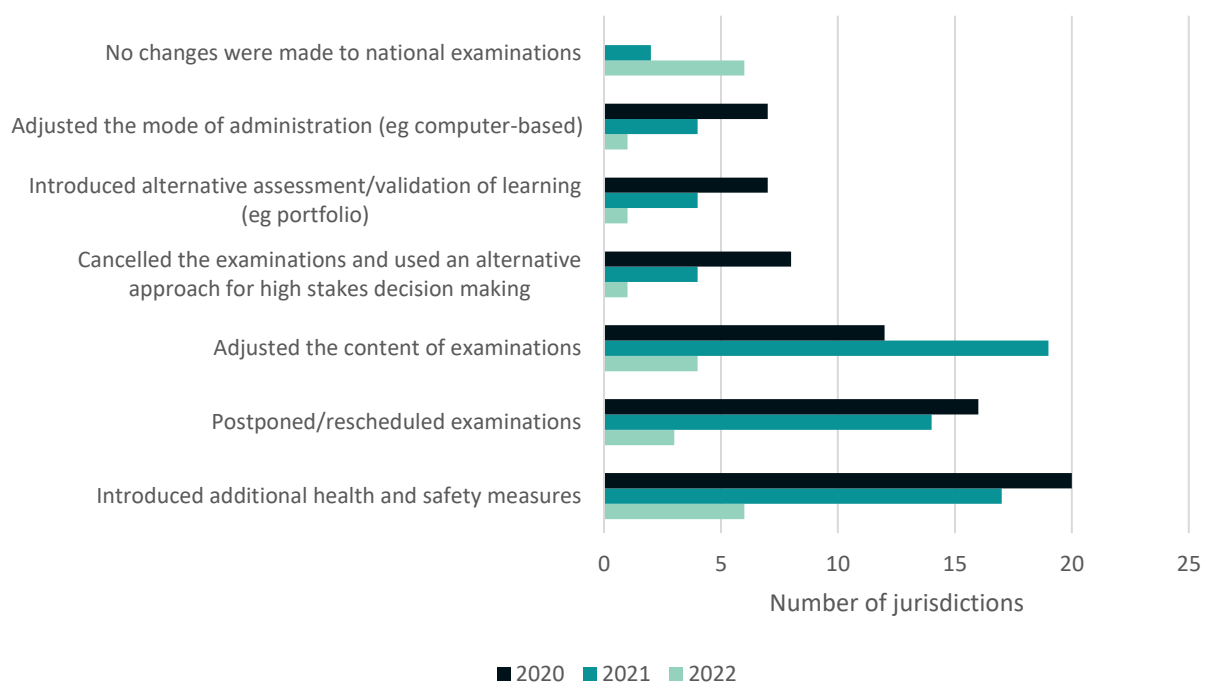
This research, in updating last year's, provides an overview of the continuing or lingering effects of the pandemic on assessment and certification across different jurisdictions. It also explores whether the experience is likely to lead to changes to assessment and qualifications in the longer term.

Two years into the pandemic

According to the OECD, there has been a gradual return to normality after the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a few countries still had periods of school closures in 2022, these were much more limited than during earlier stages of the pandemic. However, teacher and student absences continued to disrupt the learning process³ and many jurisdictions maintained some modifications or adaptations to assessment in 2022.

The chart in Figure 1 below shows some of the types of changes made to upper secondary general programme national examinations during the pandemic, in 2020, 2021, and 2022. This data comes from an OECD survey of 30 countries.⁴

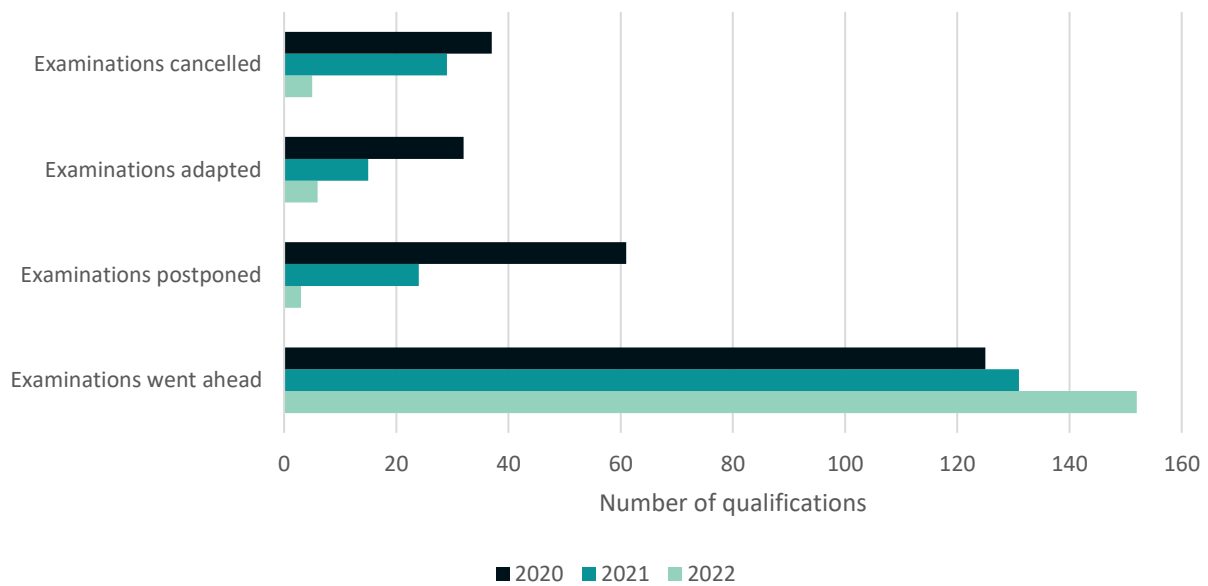
Figure 1 Have you made any of the following changes to upper secondary general programme examinations due to the pandemic?



Source: OECD

Similarly, UK ENIC has produced a reference guide for 2020, 2021, and 2022, showing, for 170 qualifications from more than 110 jurisdictions, where exams were cancelled, postponed, or the format of exams was adapted, or exams went ahead (including, on occasion, a combination of these approaches). This data is summarised in the chart in Figure 2 below. Note, however, that some 2022 approaches were still to be confirmed when the document was published in June 2022.⁵

Figure 2 Examination and assessment approaches in international qualifications, 2020 to 2022



Source: UK ENIC

The above charts give an indication of the diversity of assessment and certification strategies implemented by different jurisdictions over the pandemic period. Measures put in place are likely to have been influenced by a range of factors, including local prevalence of COVID-19 at the time, government policy regarding lockdowns and social distancing, the practicability of implementing changes, and the societal view of the importance of external assessment.

What is clear is that, perhaps unsurprisingly, changes to exams and assessment were greatly reduced in 2022 as jurisdictions moved towards post-pandemic normalisation. However, the information on the specific jurisdictions in this paper indicates that while there was a general desire to move back to pre-pandemic approaches in 2022, there were still adaptations and modifications to external assessment, to a greater or lesser extent, in most jurisdictions.

A common theme across different qualifications and assessment systems, and particularly of the approaches put in place in 2021 and 2022, was the stated desire to maximise teaching and learning time for learners whose studies had been disrupted by COVID. This focused modifications primarily on reducing the burden of assessment.

Table 1 below summarises the high-level 2022 approaches to assessment in the jurisdictions researched in this paper.

Table 1 High-level approaches to assessment in 2022

Jurisdiction	Examination	Awarding body	2022 approach to assessment
Denmark	Higher Preparatory Examination Certificate	Schools	No modifications in place
England	GCSE, AS and A level	AQA, Eduqas, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including streamlined content, advance information, more optionality and generous grading
France	Baccalaureate	Ministry of Education	Modifications including more optionality
Germany	Abitur	Länder	Modifications including more time for assessments and re-sit opportunities
Hong Kong	HKDSE	HKEAA	Modifications including streamlined content, more optionality, cancellation of oral exams and school-based assessment
Ireland	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Council	Modifications including more optionality and generous grading
Italy	Esame di Stato	Ministry of Education	Modifications including amended component weightings, with more emphasis on internal assessment
Netherlands	School Leaving Examination	Ministry of Education	Modifications including more optionality and re-sit opportunities
New Zealand	National Certificate of Educational Achievement	NZQA	Modifications including learner recognition credits and fewer credits required for university entrance
Northern Ireland	GCSE, AS and A level	CCEA, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including streamlined content, fewer assessments, more optionality and generous grading
Norway	Leaving Certificate	Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training	Cancellation of written examinations
Ontario	OSSD	Schools	Learners exempt from the literacy graduation requirement
Queensland	QCE	QCAA	No modifications in place
Scotland	National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher	SQA	Modifications including streamlined content, advance information and generous grading
Singapore	GCE examinations	SEAB	No modifications in place
Wales	GCSE, AS and A level	WJEC, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including streamlined content, fewer assessments, more optionality and generous grading

Assessment in 2023

Several jurisdictions have already announced that modified arrangements will be in place again in 2023. This is generally framed in terms of fairness to learners, who have had — and continue to have — a degree of disruption to learning due to the pandemic.

Table 2 High-level approaches to assessment in 2023

Jurisdiction	Examination	Awarding body	2023 approach to assessment
Denmark	Higher Preparatory Examination Certificate	Schools	No modifications in place
England	GCSE, AS and A level	AQA, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including provision of formulae and equations sheets for some GCSEs
France	Baccalaureate	Ministry of Education	No information
Germany	Abitur	Länder	No information
Hong Kong	HKDSE	HKEAA	Modifications including streamlined content, more optionality, cancellation of oral exams and school-based assessment
Ireland	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Council	Modifications including more optionality, gradual return to pre-pandemic grade distributions
Italy	Esame di Stato	Ministry of Education	No information
Netherlands	School Leaving Examination	Ministry of Education	Modifications including more optionality and re-sit opportunities
New Zealand	NCEA	NZQA	No information
Northern Ireland	GCSE, AS and A level	CCEA, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including advance information, gradual return to pre-pandemic grade distributions
Norway	Leaving Certificate	Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training	No information
Ontario	OSSD	Schools	No modifications in place
Queensland	QCE	QCAA	No information
Scotland	National 5, Higher, Advanced Higher	SQA	Modifications including streamlined content and advance information
Singapore	GCE examinations	SEAB	No modifications in place
Wales	GCSE, AS and A level	WJEC, AQA, OCR, Pearson	Modifications including advance information, gradual return to pre-pandemic grade distributions

In many jurisdictions it is unclear how long such modifications should remain in place, both from this research and possibly within regulators and awarding bodies themselves. It is

difficult to quantify learning loss due to the pandemic, particularly given the uneven nature of COVID-19's effects on teaching and learning.⁶ As we move from an acute pandemic stage to a normalisation period, it is more challenging still to gauge the continuing effects of COVID--19. Evaluating the consequences of lockdowns and other social restrictions is challenging but is in itself more straightforward than gauging the impact of less tangible, longer-term effects on, for instance, learner development and mental health.

Long-term effects on assessment

While it may be unclear how long any modifications to assessment approaches should remain in place, the catalysing effect of COVID-19 on longer-term, systemic change is even more uncertain.

It was argued, particularly early on in the pandemic, that the arrival of COVID-19 exposed weaknesses in the robustness and resilience of assessment systems that rely on examinations.⁷ Since then, the alternative measures put in place in several jurisdictions have also raised questions around, for example, the reliability of teacher assessment^{8,9} and the effect on practitioner workload.^{10,11} In Scotland, for example, practitioners broadly welcomed the return to external exams in 2022. Nonetheless, the cancellation of exams in 2020 and 2021 renewed debate around assessment, which led to calls from some for reform to qualifications and assessment in Scotland.¹²

The result of this unprecedented national experiment in assessment has been a plethora of organisations arguing for reform — while for others it has only proved exams are the most reliable approach... The debate piled on top of existing concerns around assessment.¹³

The pandemic has greatly escalated debate on what the future of assessment should look like and the constructs that should be assessed,¹⁴ although there is little consensus on what, if any, longer-term changes should be made. While there is a degree of unanimity around the increasing importance of digital approaches to assessment, there is a wide range of views on what the pandemic should mean for external assessment systems in more general terms.

At the beginning of the pandemic several commentators suggested the experience should precipitate a move away from examinations.¹⁵ However, there seems to have been a shift to a more nuanced debate that centres on the purpose of assessment rather than its type: that the form of assessment should follow function.

An assessment system fit for purpose in this new world should include the range of purposes that assessment is expected to serve: to support learning in individuals, in classrooms and in schools; to provide information to enable progress in learning in local, national and international education systems; and to facilitate decisions about future life paths.¹⁶

In this context, then, jurisdictions may be considering how to reposition examinations within their assessment systems, rather than replacing them wholesale. However, assessment systems evolve over time and there is no clear, single trend in how international assessment systems are changing. While experiences of the pandemic will doubtless be an important factor in these changes, developments are informed by a range of factors unique to each jurisdiction.¹⁷ The assessment systems of several of the jurisdictions highlighted in this paper

are undergoing review and reform (Ireland, Norway, and Singapore, for instance) and the pandemic experience is likely to influence their decision making. In no jurisdiction, however, does reform appear to be so explicitly linked with the COVID-19 experience as in Scotland.

Fairness

One of the key themes to emerge in debates on the future of assessment systems is fairness. The pandemic meant young people faced widespread disruption to their learning through no fault of their own. This disruption meant that the nature of teaching and learning changed, with learning undertaken remotely or in environments very different from before the pandemic. Extended periods of remote learning resulted in learning loss.¹⁸ Moreover, the effects of COVID-19 on young people's learning were unevenly distributed. While the effects of the pandemic are complex and nuanced, disadvantage and deprivation were associated with less effective learning during the pandemic and socio-economically disadvantaged students, on average, lost relatively more learning than their advantaged peers.¹⁹ There was widespread concern about increasing disparities between different groups of learners, including those of different ethnicities and those in different socio-economic groups.²⁰ COVID-19 exposed, rather than created, inequalities within the system; these may also have been exacerbated by the experience.

This disruption has exposed educational disadvantage that has hitherto remained largely hidden.

The pandemic has thrown into stark relief the different educational experiences young people can expect.²¹

However, inequalities such as these do not necessarily lead to unfairness in assessment, as traditionally understood. Fairness in assessment has conventionally been interpreted in terms of assessment instruments that give learners the opportunity to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do, while giving stakeholders useful information about what those learners know, understand, and can do.²² This enables comparability over time and across a cohort of learners. This definition of fairness is confined to system-level fairness, rather than addressing fairness to individuals.²³

For example, the initial statistical standardisation approaches put in place in the UK nations and Ireland in 2020 were thought by regulators and awarding bodies to be the fairest possible. Despite this, they were widely criticised as unfair. Critiques of the fairness of the grades awarded in 2020 applied the concept to individuals as well as at a system level.²⁴ Arguably, the long-established focus of awarding bodies and regulators on system-wide fairness has been exposed, over the course of the pandemic, to be insufficient to provide fairness for individual learners.

The COVID-19 disruption has revealed areas of contention hitherto rarely discussed in the UK in the context of exams, notably the differences in the teaching and learning experienced by different groups of students and the notion of fairness based on opportunity to learn.

Accusations of unfairness raised in attitudes to assessment in the light of COVID-19 need to be taken seriously by the assessment profession, regulators and governments and cannot be assumed to be a temporary phenomenon.²⁵

The impact of the pandemic on learning and assessment has raised questions about long-held assumptions about fair assessment. Will the experience of the pandemic shift the conceptual balance of fairness in assessment from a system-wide fairness to one of fairness to individual learners? What effect would a different definition of fairness,²⁶ one that accounts for learner circumstance and existing inequalities, have on existing assessment systems, including on validity, reliability, comparability and standards?

Grade inflation

Assessment and certification approaches put in place over the pandemic period have seen apparent grade inflation in a number of qualifications across jurisdictions. A common feature across jurisdictions has been attainment rates 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, we know that replacing exams with continuous or teacher assessment typically results in higher grades for students.²⁷

Grade inflation and changes in the distribution of grades affected, to a greater or lesser extent, systems as disparate as France, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand and Norway, as well as the UK nations. While there has been some fall back in attainment rates in 2022, as more conventional pre-pandemic approaches were re-introduced, attainment in jurisdictions that put alternative approaches in place in 2020 and 2021 remains higher than in 2019, and grade distributions remain higher at the top end.

Several jurisdictions have suggested that this will be addressed gradually, as modifications and measures such as more generous grading are withdrawn. Nonetheless, the issue of apparent grade inflation has caused concern in a number of areas, including university entrance and the perceived continued credibility and integrity of qualifications.

Conversely, there are concerns in some jurisdictions that an eventual return, no matter how gradual, to pre-pandemic grading will disadvantage future cohorts relative to those who have benefitted from assessment modifications and more generous grading.

Societal view of assessment

Different countries and jurisdictions have very different assessment systems, developed over time to meet differing requirements. SQA's research on 2020 and 2021 approaches to assessment and certification²⁸ suggested that those jurisdictions where COVID-19 assessment arrangements were most accepted by stakeholders were not necessarily those that have mainly teacher-based assessment, but where the pre-pandemic model of assessment was widely perceived to be the best and fairest way to assess young people. It continues to be the case that jurisdictions' actions in relation to assessment and certification in light of the pandemic are driven by a range of factors, not least how trusted and supported their existing assessment systems are.

For example, in Hong Kong, while examinations went ahead with widespread support, it was school-based assessment that was cancelled. In Norway, on the other hand, written examinations were cancelled as teacher assessment continued. This reflects a general consensus within different jurisdictions that their pre-pandemic methods of assessment and

assessment priorities are the correct and fairest ones. There does not appear to be a correlation between particular types of assessment approach implemented as a result of COVID and how successful those approaches were or were perceived to be.

This meant that in most jurisdictions there was little public controversy as they began the transition in 2022 back to pre-COVID-19 assessment approaches, since these approaches had, in general, retained public support.

Meanwhile, as last year's research stated, Scotland is 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-19 crisis that would have been widely accepted across all sections of society as the fairest and best way to proceed.

Recovery

As the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented disruption to education, a number of multinational organisations²⁹ have introduced a RAPID Framework for Learning Recovery and Acceleration, outlining five short-term, key policy actions:

- ◆ Reach every child and keep them in school
- ◆ Assess learning levels regularly
- ◆ Prioritise teaching the fundamentals
- ◆ Increase the efficiency of instruction, including through catch-up learning
- ◆ Develop psychosocial health and wellbeing³⁰

The fourth round of the *Survey on National Education Responses to COVID-19 School Closures* was implemented when almost all schools had re-opened and policymakers were beginning to reflect on how to respond in the post-pandemic normalisation period; responses were received from 93 countries. The main findings were analysed and presented in terms of the RAPID key policy actions and include:

- ◆ Learning losses due to COVID-19-related disruptions are real and disproportionately distributed.
- ◆ Shifting the focus of assessment from grading to monitoring and promoting learning growth will be critical.
- ◆ New ways of assessment should not only capture student knowledge and skills, but also focus on helping students become more aware of what and how they learn. This includes promoting a regular and inclusive learning assessment culture by diversifying the types of assessment tools used. It should also emphasise the use of formative assessments to meet students' individual needs, and take advantage of technologies such as digitalised and hybrid assessments.
- ◆ Deciding which parts of the curriculum to prioritise will continue to require flexibility and adaptivity to changing circumstances, putting learners at the centre of the process.
- ◆ Teachers should increasingly be involved in co-designing and facilitating curricular adjustments.³¹

Similarly, the International Educational Assessment Network has set out what they suggest are five key imperatives for assessment as education systems respond and change as a result of COVID-19.

- ◆ Align what is identified in the curriculum as important for young people with what is assessed or examined: assess and therefore drive learning that students will need to succeed in the future.
- ◆ Keep accountability systems designed to evaluate the efficacy of policy and practice focused on system level learning and improvement rather than judgement, comparison, and categorisation.
- ◆ Identify, monitor, and respond to the impact of assessment on well-being and plan for positive impact.
- ◆ Use technology to support learning not as a substitute for teacher decision-making and dialogue with learners.
- ◆ Execute a comprehensive and inclusive plan to improve understanding of 21st century assessment within and across communities.³²

These priorities and imperatives echo the arguments mentioned in the section above on the long-term effects of the pandemic on assessment. That is, the *Survey on National Education Responses* policy actions and the International Education Assessment Network imperatives contend that the post-pandemic period offers the opportunity for a shift in focus from simple assessment of learning to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. This shift, it is suggested, will improve outcomes for learners and will support education's recovery from the pandemic. Ideally, post-pandemic assessment systems will encompass stakeholder — particularly learner — involvement, more choice and personalisation, flexibility and use of technology for the benefit of individual learners and the wider education system.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on assessment systems worldwide and has sparked a wide-ranging debate about the future of assessment. The experience of the pandemic has made us consider the purposes of assessment and how best to serve those purposes in a changing world. There is, however, little consensus on what the long-term effects of the pandemic on assessment should or will be.

After large-scale changes to exams and assessments in 2020 and 2021, by 2022 there was a general trend across jurisdictions to return to pre-pandemic approaches. However, most jurisdictions researched in this paper still maintained elements of modifications and adaptations to their assessment systems in 2022. These changes were aimed at maximising teaching and learning time for learners whose studies had been affected by COVID, and are focused on reducing the burden of assessment. While some jurisdictions will still have modified arrangements in place in 2023, there is evidence (see table 2) that jurisdictions are beginning to remove or reduce them.

The issue of fairness in assessment has become increasingly prominent, with widespread concern about the unequal distribution of the effects of the pandemic on young people's learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed disparities in educational experiences and

has perhaps highlighted the challenges of taking into account individual learner circumstances and existing inequalities.

More broadly, the pandemic has raised questions about the validity and reliability of different types of assessment, including exams and teacher assessment. The lack of consensus on what form the future of assessment should take, the issues presented by apparent grade inflation, and the need to balance fairness to individual learners with system-wide fairness present challenges for regulators and the assessment profession. Addressing the issues raised by the pandemic will require a collaborative and evidence-based approach that considers the needs and perspectives of all stakeholders, bearing in mind the cultural norms and expectations of each jurisdiction. The future of assessment systems will be shaped by the outcomes of these debates, the local cultural context, and the broader trends and challenges in education and society.

Specific jurisdictions

For each jurisdiction, the following information has been gathered:

- ◆ pre-pandemic assessment context
- ◆ changes to exams and assessment implemented in 2020, 2021 and 2022
- ◆ effect of the changes to exams and assessment
- ◆ reaction to and perception of the changes to exams and assessment
- ◆ future plans and how jurisdictions are returning to pre-pandemic standards

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, 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 (including from awarding body, regulator, and government websites and media reports) in the English language (or translated into the English language through Google Translate); it may therefore contain unavoidable omissions or misinterpretations. Moreover, readily available information may reflect policy intent, rather than practice.

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 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.

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.³³

The Ministry of Education sets all written examination questions and appoints external examiners for all examinations, both oral and written.³⁴

A student's certificate will contain:

- ◆ examination marks
- ◆ marks for the year's work
- ◆ marks for specialised study projects / major written assignments
- ◆ average marks³⁵

Danish education is highly decentralised and school autonomy levels are high.³⁶ 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.³⁷

Changes to exams and assessment

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.³⁸

In 2021, again the number of exams was reduced to allow more teaching and learning time to account for school closures. However, the government emphasised that holding some external exams was important for students.³⁹

In 2022, exams went ahead as normal.⁴⁰ Upper secondary graduates received a final diploma by the end of June, with the final diploma having a calculated grade point average.⁴¹

Impact of changes to assessment

While Statistics Denmark publishes data on entries and completions at the upper secondary level,⁴² it has not been possible to find school leaving exam attainment data to compare exam performance in 2020, 2021 or 2022 with pre-pandemic levels.

Reaction to changes

Assessment arrangements returned to normal in 2022 and this appears to have attracted little controversy or reaction.

Future plans

Assessment arrangements have returned to the pre-pandemic approach.

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.

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 in England 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 performance. The grade U denotes a fail.⁴³

Changes to exams and assessment

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

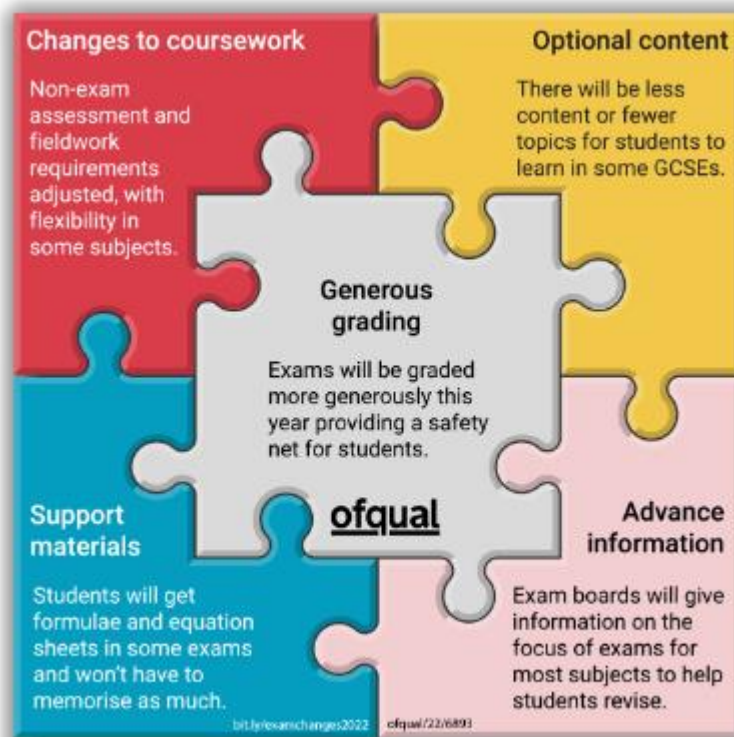
In 2020, schools and colleges were asked to provide centre assessment grades (CAGs) for each subject. This grade was intended to reflect the grade that the student would most likely have achieved if they had sat the exam. Schools and colleges were also asked to submit the rank order of students within each grade for each subject, which was used within the statistical standardisation process. 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.⁴⁴

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 Ofqual⁴⁵ and by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)⁴⁶ on how teachers should determine the grades. Results were based on grades submitted to exam boards by teachers. The teacher assessed grades (TAGs) were determined by teachers drawing upon a range of evidence.⁴⁷

In 2022, examinations took place, but with a package of support in place for students. These were unprecedented exam arrangements to respond to the continuing impact of the pandemic.⁴⁸

- ◆ The government introduced a choice of topics or content in some GCSE exams.
- ◆ Exam boards gave advance information about the focus of the content of exams, designed to provide revision guidance for students.
- ◆ Study aids were allowed in some exams.⁴⁹

Figure 3 Overview of 2022 package of support



Source: Ofqual

After consulting in September and October of 2021, Ofqual announced their contingency arrangements in November. The announcement stated the expectation that exams would go ahead in summer 2022. In recognition of the disruption students had faced, the following was communicated:

- ◆ Students taking GCSEs in English Literature, History, Ancient History and Geography would not need to cover the usual range of content in the exams.
- ◆ Students taking GCSEs in all other subjects would be given advance information about the content of the exams to help them focus their revision.
- ◆ Students taking AS and A levels would be given advance information about the content of the exams to help them focus their revision.
- ◆ Students taking GCSEs in Mathematics would be given in their exams copies of formulae they would in other years have to memorise.
- ◆ Students taking GCSE Physics and Combined Science would be given in their exams a sheet covering all the equations they might need to apply in the exams.⁵⁰

Moreover, in 2022 exam boards set the grade boundaries based on a profile that was intended to reflect a midpoint between 2021 and pre-pandemic grading. This process was to provide a safety net for students, to take account of the disruption the cohort had experienced and recognise the fact that most A level students would not have taken public exams before:

Essentially, it's about being as fair as we can be to students. Students' learning has been disrupted due to the pandemic through no fault of their own, and our approach, will take account of that.⁵¹

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.⁵²

In 2022 there was a return to more normal procedures, as noted above, so Ofqual asked exam boards to set grade boundaries reflecting a midpoint between 2021 and pre-pandemic grading. The chart in Figure 4 below shows A level grade distributions in England over the past four years.

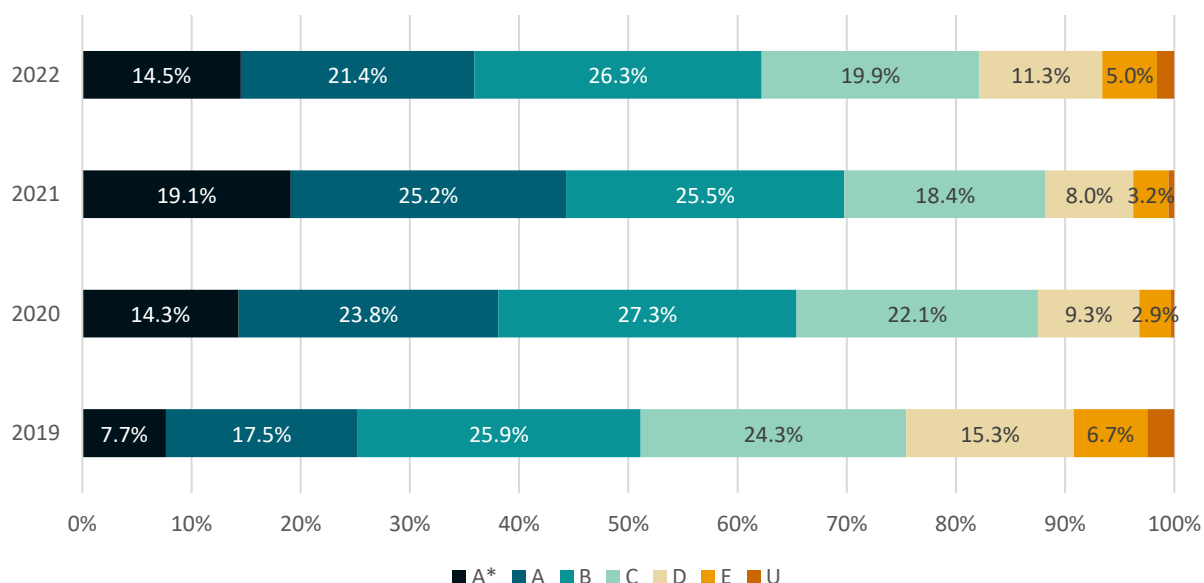
Comparing 2022 with 2019 (when exams were last sat):

- ◆ outcomes at grades A*–E were up by 0.9 percentage points (pp) from 97.5% to 98.4%.
- ◆ grade A* increased by 6.8pp from 7.7% to 14.5%.
- ◆ grades A*–A increased by 10.7pp from 25.2% to 35.9%.⁵³

Comparing 2022 with 2021 (when TAGs were used):

- ◆ outcomes at grades A*–E decreased by 1.1pp from 99.5% to 98.4%.
- ◆ grade A* decreased by 4.6pp from 19.1% to 14.5%.
- ◆ grades A*–A decreased by 8.4pp from 44.3% to 35.9%.⁵⁴

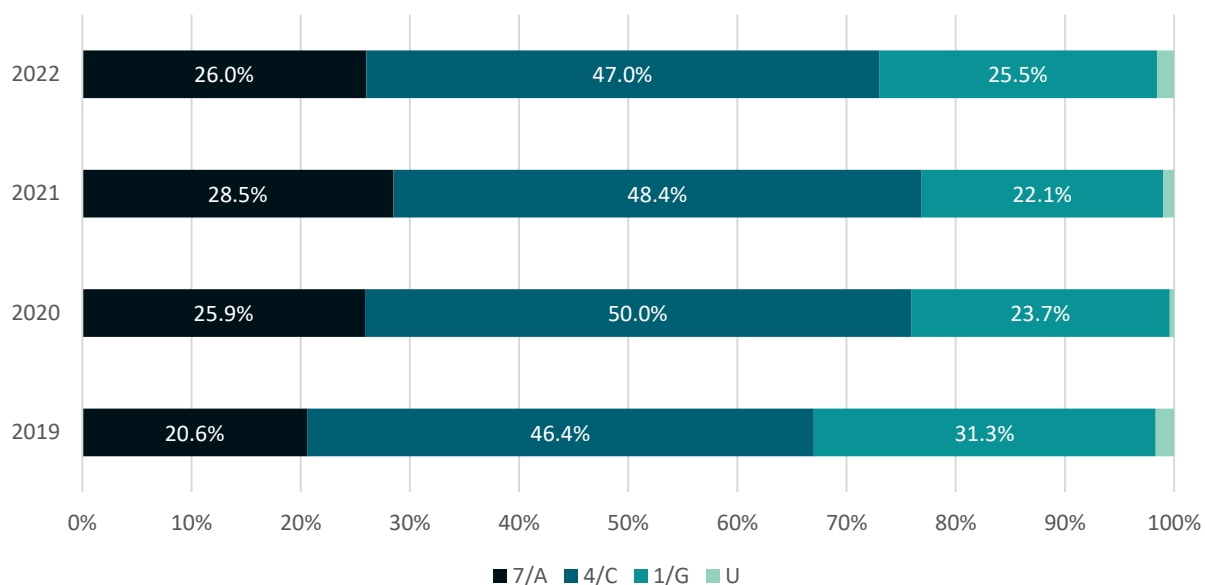
Figure 4 England A level grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

The increase in higher grades at GCSE in 2020 and 2021 was less marked than that seen at A level over the same period, but still apparent. The chart in Figure 5 below shows GCSE grade distributions over the past four years.

Figure 5 England GCSE grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

- ◆ Outcomes at grade 7 and above were up 5.4pp on 2019 (from 20.6% to 26.0%) but down 2.5pp from 2021 (from 28.5% to 26.0%)
- ◆ Outcomes at grade 4 and above were 73% — up 6.0pp on 2019, but down 3.9pp on 2021

AS levels in England have much smaller numbers of entries, but the general pattern of grade distributions over the past four years echoes those in A level and GCSE.

Some of the impacts of 2022's assessment and grading process are highlighted below.

The regional attainment gap — There are many factors associated with educational inequality and attainment gaps. These factors include economic disadvantage, ethnicity, disability, gender and whether a child has been in care or has special educational needs and/or disability. There is also regional variation in the size of the attainment gaps.⁵⁵ This regional attainment gap widened in 2022. Students in London and the south-east received a higher percentage of A and A* grades at A level than those in other regions; students in the north east of England received the lowest percentage.⁵⁶ The gap in grades A*–A achievement between the north-east and London was slightly less than 4pp in 2019, but was 8.2pp in 2022.⁵⁷ GCSEs followed the same pattern as A level results, with students in London and the south east receiving a higher percentage of the top grades (7 and above) than their counterparts in the rest of the country. The north-east of England and Yorkshire and the Humber received the lowest percentage.⁵⁸

The gap in attainment between state and independent schools — The arrangements for awarding GCSEs and A levels in 2020 and 2021 saw the gap in attainment between independent

schools and state schools widen. The return to exams has seen this gap narrow. The difference in A level entries graded A*–A between independent schools and state selective schools has returned to around 8pp having reached almost 14pp in 2021.⁵⁹ However, this gap is still larger than it was in 2019.⁶⁰ There is a similar pattern at GCSE.⁶¹

Differences in boys’ and girls’ attainment — At A level, in 2018 and 2019, female and male students tended to achieve around the same percentage of A*–A grades. Female students have long tended to achieve a higher percentage of A*–B grades and male students tended to achieve more A* grades. In 2020 and 2021, female students achieved more A*–A grades than male students, and increased the gap at grades A*–B. They also achieved more A* grades than male students. The return to exams has seen the gap between female and male attainment narrow again, but not close.⁶²

Disparities between different subjects in the decline of A level A* grades between 2021 and 2022 — Some A level subjects saw far greater declines in top grades than others. Those subjects with the greatest decline in A* grades between 2021 and 2022 were: Spanish (-9pp), French (-6pp), Mathematics (-6pp), Chemistry (-5pp), and Biology (-5pp). Those with the smallest decline in A* grades were: English Language (-2pp), Sociology (-2pp), Law (-2pp), Art and Design (-3pp) and Business Studies (-3pp). ‘Some of these disparities are likely linked to pre-pandemic differences between subjects.’⁶³

A level A*–A grades are still above the midpoint between 2019 and 2021 — In almost all cases, the percentage of A level entries graded A*–A in 2022 is above the midpoint of the percentages for 2019 and 2021. Exceptions were Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics, but these were only very slightly lower than the midpoint. The percentage of entries graded A*–A in some subjects in 2022 remains far higher than in 2019.⁶⁴ Likewise, GCSE results remain higher than the midpoint between 2019 and 2021.⁶⁵

University entrance — The Department for Education stated that a record number of 18-year-olds in England had their place at university confirmed.⁶⁶ While the overall number of students accepted by a university was down on 2021, it was still higher than the years before that.⁶⁷ UCAS stated that the 2022 university admission cycle was more competitive than those of recent years for reasons including a record number of 18-year-olds and grade outcomes remaining higher than in 2019.⁶⁸

Reaction to changes

After the disruption of the past two years, the 2022 process and the return to ‘almost normal’ generated little controversy. This was, perhaps, not least because Ofqual had stated its plans early on in the academic year and these did not alter as a result of changing circumstances.

Much of the media reaction to the 2022 exam results in England — particularly A level — centred on apparent efforts to ‘rein in’ grade inflation after changes to grade distributions in 2020 and 2021.⁶⁹ While this coverage was generally supportive of the move back to more normal grading after the disruption of 2020 and 2021, issues picked up on included those detailed above, particularly, the regional attainment gaps.⁷⁰

Future plans

Ofqual has confirmed that there will be a full return in England to pre-pandemic GCSE, AS, and A level grading in 2023, in line with the plan they set out in late 2021. Moreover, exams will largely return to pre-pandemic arrangements.

To protect students against the disruption of recent years, senior examiners will use the grades achieved by previous cohorts of students, along with prior attainment data, to inform their decisions about where to set grade boundaries.

This mirrors the approach used in the first years of reformed GCSEs and A levels in 2017, when early cohorts were protected against the impact of changes to the qualifications and means, for example, a typical A level student who would have achieved a grade A before the pandemic will be just as likely to get an A this summer.⁷¹

Furthermore, students will continue to be provided with support in GCSE Mathematics, Physics and Combined Science with formulae and equation sheets,⁷² but not with advance information of exam content, as was the case in 2022.⁷³

We expect that overall results in 2023 will be much closer to pre-pandemic years than results since 2020. This decision means that results in 2023 will be lower than in 2022.⁷⁴

Pre-pandemic arrangements for non-exam assessment, fieldwork, and Practical Science have been re-instated and centres will be required to teach the full content of qualifications to students taking exams in 2023.⁷⁵

Ofqual issued guidance to centres about gathering assessment evidence to support resilience in the system.⁷⁶ The guidance proposes that centres gather evidence in a way that aligns with their normal arrangements for preparing students for exams, while ensuring preparedness for a scenario where exams could not go ahead.

France

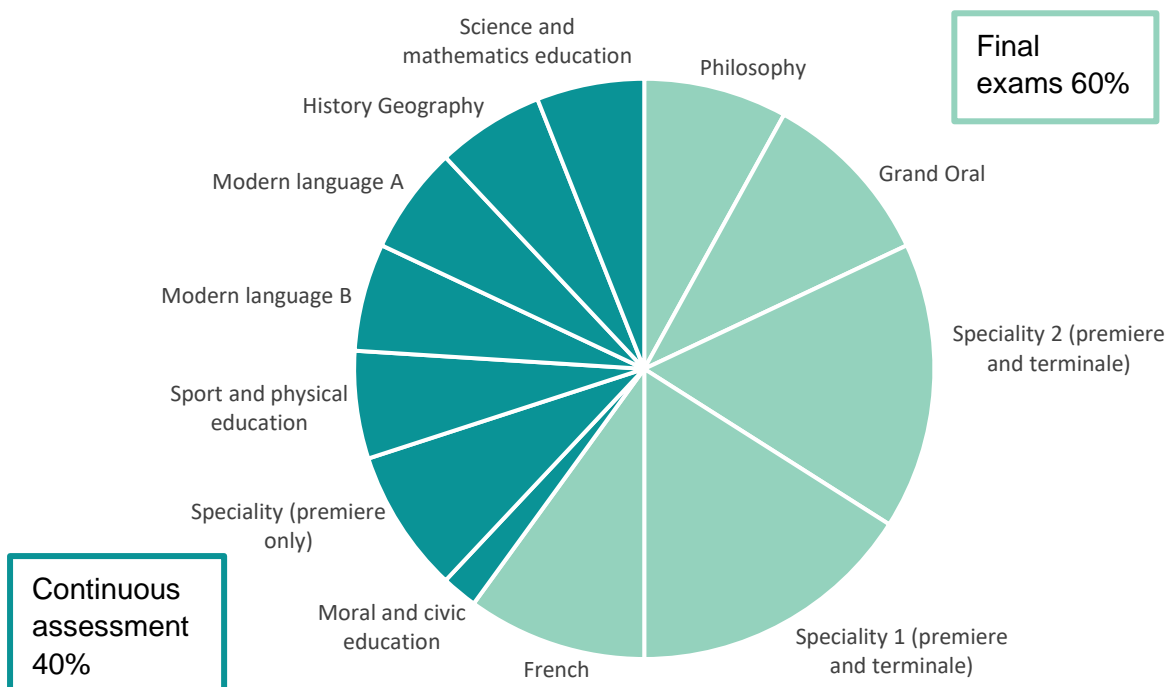
Context

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, the baccalaureate now comprises more internal assessment (40%; previously only 10% of the mark was made up of internal assessment marks).⁷⁷ The baccalaureate is no longer split into distinct literary, scientific or social science versions, but consists of a common core plus individual choices of specialities.⁷⁸

There are five common core subjects in both *première* and *terminale* (the final two years of *lycée*, respectively). Students also choose speciality subjects — three in *première* and two in *terminale*. In *première*, students are internally assessed throughout the year and their mark is based on the weighted annual average. In *terminale*, continuous assessment is based on the weighted annual average in each of the subjects of the common core. Internal assessment is worth 40% of a student's baccalaureate mark. At the end of *terminale*, final exams are held in French, Philosophy, and the student's two *terminale* speciality subjects. There is also a final Grand Oral exam taken before a three-person panel; this is an oral defence of a two-year research project that links with one of the speciality subjects. These final exams are weighted and together are worth 60% of the baccalaureate mark.⁷⁹

Figure 6 Calculation of final baccalaureate marks



Source: Cours Thalès

Changes to exams and assessment

For 2020, grades were based on continuous assessment throughout the year. Grades achieved in the *première* exams also counted towards the final grade. Grades were then moderated and reviewed by an examination panel.⁸⁰

In 2021, assessment for the baccalaureate changed as part of the planned reforms, but it was also disrupted by the continued impact of the pandemic. In 2021, speciality subjects and French were assessed through continuous assessment because those exams were cancelled.⁸¹ The final Philosophy exam and the Grand Oral for students in *terminale* went ahead in June.⁸²

In 2022, assessment for the baccalaureate went ahead, but with some amendments due to COVID-19. Exams for specialities that were scheduled for March 2022 were pushed back until May. Moreover, adaptations in place meant that students had more choice of topics. A statement from the Ministry of Education said:

*Considering the numerous and successive absences caused by COVID, pupils are finding themselves in widely differing situations in terms of preparation. The health crisis has meant that the situation can vary from one place to the next, for example in the overseas departments, but also in certain metropolitan regions where we have observed some difficulties or pupil absences, even now, in connection to Omicron. To maintain the tests at the same March dates would have led to a lack of equality between candidates.*⁸³

June and July exams went ahead as scheduled.⁸⁴

Impact of changes to assessment

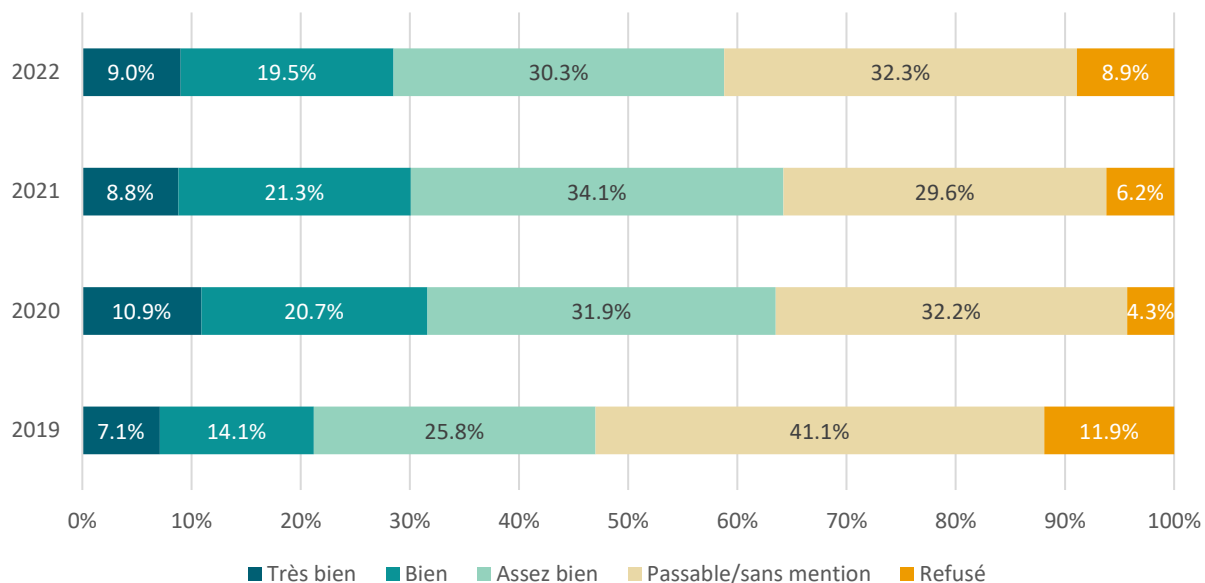
The speciality exams normally take place in March because they are then used to inform students' higher education applications. As this was not possible in 2022, the speciality exam results were replaced with students' average grades achieved in *première* and the first two terms of *terminale*.⁸⁵

Notwithstanding the delay of these speciality exams, 2022 saw a return to planned exams in France.⁸⁶ However, as noted above, assessment for the baccalaureate in 2022 was not the same as in 2019, due to the reforms introduced from 2020 onwards. It was, nonetheless, the first year that the reformed baccalaureate was assessed as planned.

- ◆ The overall pass rate in 2021 was 93.8%, slightly lower than the 95.7% of candidates who passed in 2020, but higher than all other years prior to that. This year the overall pass rate fell to 91.1%.⁸⁷
- ◆ In 2022, 58.8% of students achieved a *mention* (a *très bien*, *bien* or *assez bien* pass), compared to 64.2% in 2021 and 63.5% in 2019. This is still significantly higher than the 47% who achieved a *mention* in 2019.⁸⁸

Baccalaureate grade distributions from 2019 to 2022 are shown in the chart in Figure 7 below. While overall distributions remain closer to 2020 and 2021 than the pre-pandemic 2019, it is difficult to judge whether this is due to the continuing effects of COVID arrangements or to the baccalaureate reforms.

Figure 7 Baccalaureate grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



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

Reaction to changes

A teachers' strike in January 2022 called for the (subsequently implemented) delay to March exams.⁸⁹ However, any ongoing controversy has generally been about the reforms to the baccalaureate itself, rather than anything attributable to changes made as a result of COVID--19.⁹⁰

Future plans

The Ministry of Education has a health protocol in place for the 2022–23 school year,⁹¹ but the intention is for assessment of the reformed baccalaureate to go ahead as planned.

Germany

Context

Education policy in Germany is the responsibility of individual states, or *Länder* (singular *Land*). Ministers of education from each of the sixteen states meet twice a year at a national conference to align their plans and practices.⁹²

Upper secondary in Germany concludes with the *Abitur* examination. This is a broad qualification more akin to a baccalaureate than an A level. 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.⁹³

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. The exact scoring system depends on the *Land* in which the *Abitur* is taken. Passing the *Abitur*, in general, requires a composite score of at least 300. Students with a score below that minimum fail. *Abitur* subject grades are expressed as marks out of 15 points, while overall *Abitur* grades are expressed on a six-point scale, with 1 the highest. A grade of 4 is the lowest passing grade.⁹⁴

An *Abitur* grants acceptance to university. A student's *Abitur* grade will determine into which university and course they are accepted. Competitive courses such as law and medicine require a high grade.⁹⁵

There is no single results day.⁹⁶ Certificates (*Zeugnis der Allgemeinen Hochschulreife*) are issued in the *Länder* between mid-June and mid-July.⁹⁷

Changes to exams and assessment

In 2020, the *Länder* were divided on whether exams should go ahead or not.⁹⁸ Despite nationwide school closures until Easter and the opposition of some *Länder* governments that 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.⁹⁹

In 2021, again exams went ahead.¹⁰⁰ This was despite further school closures¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰²

In 2022, exams went ahead. There were still some modifications in place, although these varied across different states. In Berlin, for example, students had the right to repeat failed exams, and written examinations were extended by 30 minutes.¹⁰³

Impact of changes to assessment

There are no national figures available on grade distributions.¹⁰⁴ While there was media discussion about *Abitur* grades being higher than normal in 2020, this has not been the case in 2021 and 2022.

While Germany's university entrance rate has increased in recent years, this is a continuing trend over several (pre-pandemic) years¹⁰⁵ and is to do with factors such as increasing international enrolment rather than higher *Abitur* pass rates during the pandemic.¹⁰⁶

Reaction to changes

The decision of Germany's *Länder* to go ahead with exams in 2020 (and 2021, to a lesser extent) was not without controversy, given health concerns and school closures. This controversy was not repeated in 2022.

Future plans

While there are discussions around Germany having a country-, instead of state-, wide *Abitur*, these are not related specifically to the pandemic. It does not appear that arrangements for assessment and certification will be affected in the long term by the COVID-19 experience.

Hong Kong

Context

The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) was introduced in 2012. Most school candidates 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,¹⁰⁷ category B Applied Learning subjects, or category C Other Language subjects.¹⁰⁸

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*.¹⁰⁹

School-based assessment (SBA) is assessment where students are assessed by their own teachers. SBA marks awarded count towards HKDSE results. 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.¹¹⁰

Changes to exams and assessment

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.¹¹¹

In 2020, the Chinese Language and English Language speaking examinations were cancelled and SBA carried more weight than usual. 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.¹¹² 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.

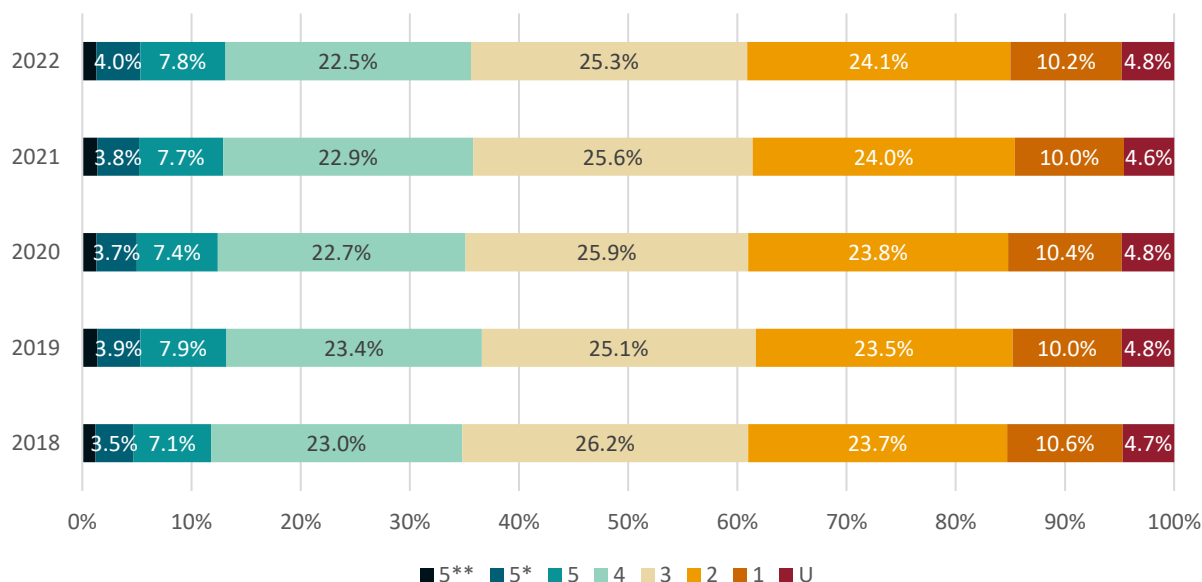
In 2022, considering the impact of extended class suspension under the COVID-19 pandemic on the learning and teaching of the cohort of students sitting the HKDSE, the following measures were put in place:

- ◆ cancellation of the speaking examination of Chinese Language
- ◆ cancellation of the speaking examination of English Language
- ◆ streamlining of the practical examinations of Physical Education and Music
- ◆ streamlining the requirements of the written examinations of nine Category A subjects, including reducing the number of questions to be attempted and/or making some compulsory questions optional
- ◆ cancellation of SBA of 10 Category A subjects and streamlining the remaining four subjects
- ◆ adjusting the weightings of the remaining papers¹¹³

Impact of changes to assessment

Category A Traditional Academic subject data¹¹⁴ in Figure 8 below demonstrates that 2020, 2021 and 2022 results do not show any grade inflation or any significant change in grade distribution from previous years.

Figure 8 HKDSE category A subjects grade distributions, 2017 to 2022



Source: HKEAA

Reaction to changes

Hong Kong is a society that values examinations as central to selection and progress. The introduction of SBA has not been without controversy. Examination results are high-stakes for students as there is intense competition for government-funded university places.¹¹⁵ In common with other countries in East Asia, Hong Kong pushed on with large-scale exams in 2020, 2021 and 2022, despite the pandemic, because it was perceived that cancelling them would create new problems and cause discontent among students and their families.¹¹⁶

While HKEAA had contingency plans¹¹⁷ to use SBA marks should HKDSE examinations need to be cancelled in 2022, this option attracted little approval; examinations in Hong Kong retain strong support and postponement was judged to be preferable to cancellation.¹¹⁸

HKEAA suggests that research comparing schools' predicted grades with actual HKDSE results shows that school assessments can 'in general' reflect students' performance in the HKDSE,¹¹⁹ but they did state (in 2020) that the variance means that predicted grades would only be used as a last resort should exams have to be cancelled.¹²⁰

Future plans

Public examinations from the HKDSE in Hong Kong in 2023 will again be streamlined.

- ◆ The independent study enquiry of Liberal Studies and the speaking examination of Chinese Language will be cancelled.

- ◆ SBA will be cancelled for all subjects except for Chinese Language, English Language, Design and Applied Technology, and Visual Arts. The SBA requirements in these four subjects will be streamlined.
- ◆ The public examinations in nine elective subjects will be streamlined with modifications, including reducing the number of questions and making some compulsory questions optional.
- ◆ The practical examination and portfolio assessment of Music, and the practical examination of Physical Education will be streamlined.¹²¹

These decisions were taken with a view to freeing up more learning time and providing more flexibility for the cohort of students affected by COVID-19.

Ireland

Context

Post-primary education in Ireland has two stages: junior cycle from age 12 to 15 and senior cycle from age 16 to 18. During their final two years in the senior cycle, students in Ireland take one of three Leaving Certificate programmes, each leading to a state examination:

- ◆ Established Leaving Certificate
- ◆ Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme
- ◆ Leaving Certificate Applied¹²²

The Leaving Certificate grants access to higher education. 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, the initial response to the lockdown was to move the examinations to July. This led to a strong student protest, and, in a change of policy, the final-year examinations were cancelled, with grades being determined by schools and then moderated through a national standardisation process. The majority (79%) of grades submitted by schools remained unchanged following the standardisation process.¹²³

In 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 of the two grades would be recorded in the Leaving Certificate results.¹²⁴ Accredited grades were 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 to national standardisation.¹²⁵

In 2022, assessment arrangements were adjusted for Leaving Certificate exams. These arrangements were designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Education stated there would be no centrally prescribed adjustment of the curriculum, but that the most appropriate way to take account of the challenges that students faced was to incorporate adjustments to the Certificate examinations.¹²⁶

Additional choice was incorporated into the written examinations^{127,128} and there was a commitment that results would be in line with those of 2021.¹²⁹ Furthermore, there was no exam fee for the Leaving Certificate and there was no fee to sit the deferred Leaving Certificate exams.¹³⁰

Impact of changes to assessment

A total of 1122 students, or 2% of candidates, secured maximum points in the 2022 Leaving Certificate exams. This is a more than fourfold increase since 2019 — the last set of Leaving Certificate exams before the pandemic — when a total of 207 students, or 0.4% of candidates, achieved maximum points. Furthermore, 25% of students achieved 500 points or more in 2022. This compares to 27% in 2021 and 13% in 2019.

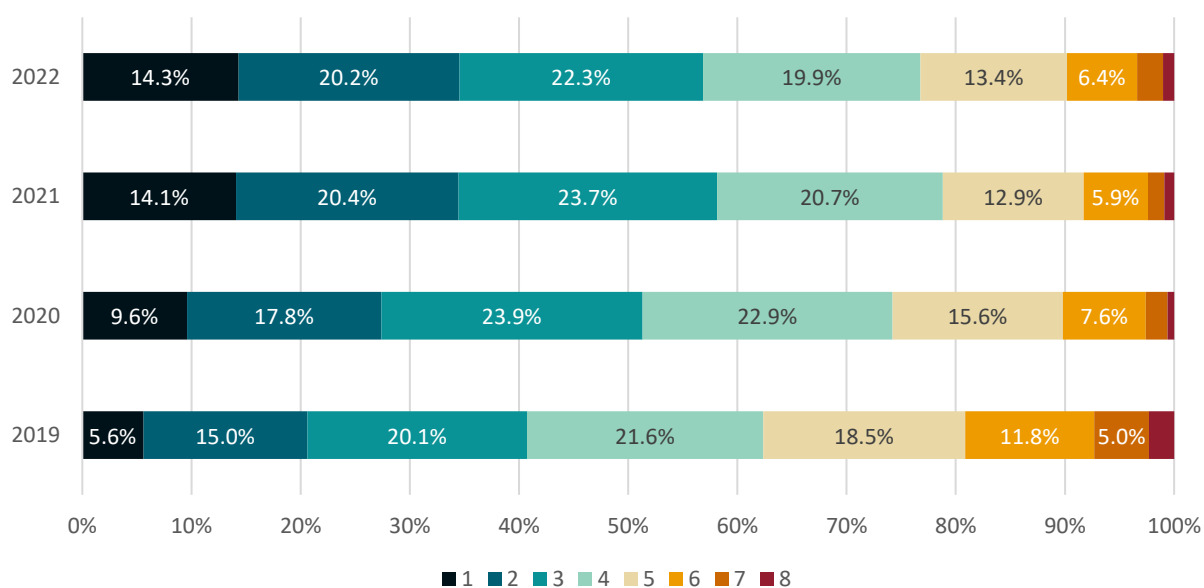
The increase reflects an increase in grades at the higher end during COVID-19 as a result of changes in assessment, which included more generous teachers' predicted grades. However, there was a slight decrease in the proportion of students securing high points in 2022 compared to 2021.¹³¹

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.¹³²

The charts in Figures 9 and 10 below show subject-aggregated Leaving Certificate grade distributions over the past four years: the pre-pandemic 2019, the disrupted 2020 and 2021, and 2022.¹³³ The 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 can be manipulated.)

Higher level Grade 1 awards increased from 5.6% pre-COVID to 9.6% in 2020 and around 14% in 2021 and 2022.

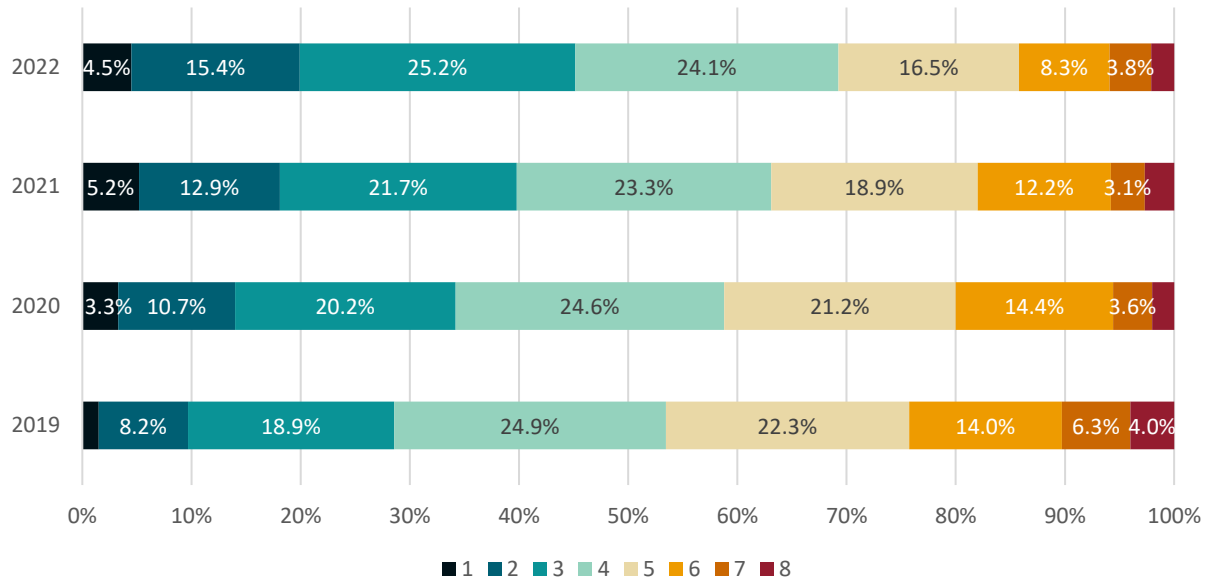
Figure 9 Higher level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: SEC

At Ordinary level, the proportion of awards given a Grade 1 has increased from 2% in 2019 to 4.5% in 2022, while the proportion of awards given a Grade 2 has increased from 8.2% in 2019 to 15.4% in 2022.

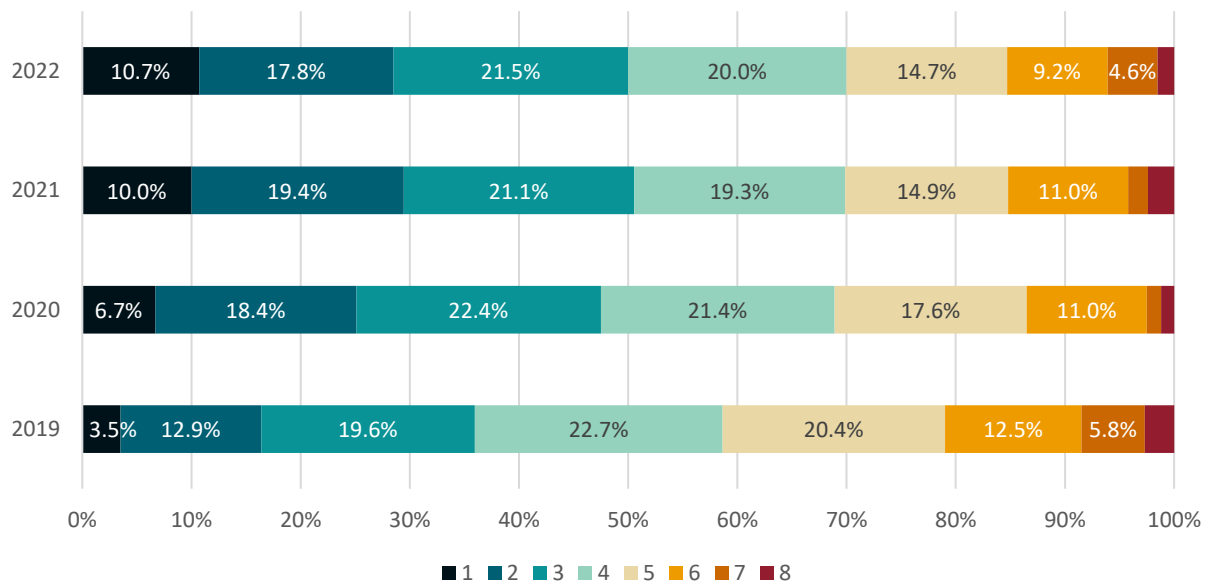
Figure 10 Ordinary level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: SEC

Only available in Irish and Mathematics, entry numbers for Foundation level Leaving Certificates are much lower, as shown in the chart in Figure 11 below. Here, too, however, there is evidence of a higher proportion of grades at the top end over the pandemic period, with increases levelling off somewhat between 2021 and 2022.

Figure 11 Foundation level Leaving Certificate grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: SEC

Despite securing top grades this year, some students with 625 points missed out on their first preference college course due to the use of random selection, or a lottery, to award places. Universities said they were forced to use a lottery due to the bunching of students with top grades, which made it difficult to differentiate between the top candidates for courses.¹³⁴

Reaction to changes

The use of random selection in about 50 college courses prompted a number of academics and university leaders to call for a return to normal grades as soon as possible.¹³⁵ This was framed in terms of Ireland needing to address grade inflation and protect the integrity of the Leaving Certificate.¹³⁶

Future plans

In September 2022, Minister for Education Norma Foley announced that adjustments would be made to the assessment arrangements for students due to sit state examinations in 2023, to take account of the disruption to their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁷

The level of adjustment will be the same as that for 2022, but updated as relevant. These adjustments leave intact the overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice for students.¹³⁸ Arrangements are designed to take account of the continued disrupted learning experienced by students.¹³⁹

The Minister for Education has said there will not be a cliff-edge drop in the profile of students' Leaving Certificate grades in 2023. Instead, grade distributions will return to pre-pandemic levels in stages over the coming years in order not to disadvantage Leaving Certificate students competing for college places against candidates with results from previous years.¹⁴⁰

Separately, a vision for the reform of senior cycle education in Ireland has also been set out, informed by the work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and its Advisory Report on Senior Cycle Reform. There will be a move away from outcomes based entirely on written examinations towards more teacher assessment.¹⁴¹

Italy

Context

*Diploma di Esame di Stato*¹⁴² is the Italian upper secondary school leaving certificate. Students obtaining the diploma can progress to higher education. The diploma includes teacher-assessed elements as well as externally-assessed written and oral examinations. The final diploma mark is the sum of the average marks achieved 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.

From 2019, the state examination has included two written national exams and an oral examination. On successful completion of final-year exams, a student is awarded the *Diploma di Esame di Stato*.¹⁴³

Changes to exams and assessment

Changes to assessment in 2020 and 2021 included the cancellation of all written examinations.¹⁴⁴ In the absence of written examinations, the weighting of both the oral and internal teacher assessments was increased.¹⁴⁵

Written exams returned for the *Esame di Stato* in 2022. However, only 25% of a student's grade was based on the written exam, compared to 45% pre-pandemic; the oral exam made up 25% of the grade, compared to 35% pre-pandemic; and internal assessment made up 50%, compared to 20% pre-pandemic.¹⁴⁶

Table 3 Changes to final-year exams in Italy as a result of COVID

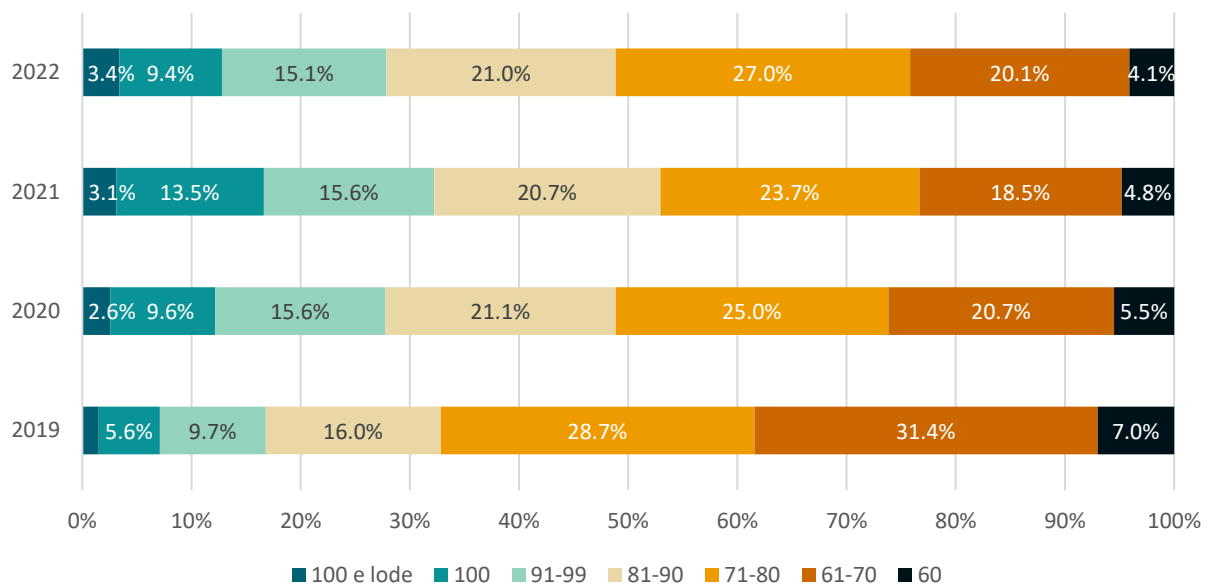
Component	Pre-pandemic	2020	2021	2022
Written exams	45	–	–	25
Oral exam	35	40	40	25
Internal school assessment	20	60	60	50
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: ECCTIS

Impact of changes to assessment

Results for 2020 and 2021¹⁴⁷ showed increases on 2019 at the top end of the grade distribution. In 2022, the proportion of students achieving the top four grades (81 or more) fell compared to 2020 and 2021, but remained much higher (16.1pp) than in 2019.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, the proportion of students graduating with distinction (*100 e lode*) increased from 3.1% of all students in 2021 to 3.4% of all students in 2022; this compares to 1.5% in 2019.

Figure 12 Esame di Stato grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: Ministero dell'Istruzione

Reaction to changes

A student petition against the reinstatement of written exams suggested that they were stressful and inferior to internal assessment.¹⁴⁹ However, in general, there seems to have been little adverse public reaction to what the Ministry of Education terms a gradual return to normality.¹⁵⁰

Future plans

While the Italian government has said that there will be a phased return to normality, it is not yet clear whether the *Esame di Stato* will return to its pre-pandemic component weightings in 2023.

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. Dutch, English and Mathematics are core subjects.

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 students in particular subjects whenever they wish. The school exam usually comprises two or more tests per subject, which may be oral, practical or written.

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.¹⁵¹

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.¹⁵²

Changes to exams and assessment

In 2020, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science cancelled national exams, giving schools more time to complete the school exams. Learners' school leaving certificates were based on their results in the school exams.¹⁵³

In 2021, national exams went ahead, but with some adaptations. Measures included candidates being able to spread their exams over two periods, more time for teaching and learning, candidates being allowed to re-sit two subjects later in the summer, and candidates being able to exclude the grade of one (non-core) subject from their results.¹⁵⁴

In 2022, the 2021 adaptations remained in place. The Ministry of Education said that students were again allowed to drop one non-core subject from their results. Although schools faced fewer lockdown measures, quarantine rules meant they experienced a 'far from normal' school year, Education Minister Dennis Wiersma said. A more flexible timetable for national exams remained in place and students were given two opportunities for re-sits.¹⁵⁵

Impact of changes to assessment

In 2020, it was reported that the Netherlands recorded a higher pass rate after its central exams were cancelled.¹⁵⁶ The education ministry rejected claims that the high pass rate meant the exams had been devalued.¹⁵⁷

Again in 2021, it was reported that pass rates were higher than before the pandemic, despite the fact that the national exam took place. They were, however, slightly lower than in 2020.¹⁵⁸

It has not been possible to find information on 2022 pass rates.

Reaction to changes

While there were claims in 2020 that the high pass rate meant that exams had been devalued, there is little information on reaction to changes to assessment and certification since then.

Future plans

As in 2021 and 2022, in 2023 candidates will be able to exclude a grade from a non-core subject. The core subjects (Dutch, English, and Mathematics) will count towards the final grade. In 2023, candidates will again be allowed an extra re-sit opportunity.

Though not directly related to COVID, work is being undertaken to modernise and improve the state examination in the longer term.¹⁵⁹

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), 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 Year 11 students follow NCEA courses Level 1, progressing to Level 2 in Year 12, and Level 3 in Year 13.

The NCEA is intended for all students. 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. A minimum of 60 credits must be achieved at Level 3 to achieve the highest standard of NCEA.¹⁶⁰

Changes to exams and assessment

In 2020, teaching, learning and assessment were disrupted as a result of the pandemic. As a result of school closures, some adjustments were made to assessments.¹⁶¹ Additional support and credits (learner recognition credits) were awarded to students.¹⁶² Students in Auckland, who had faced more disruption to teaching and learning than others, received more support.

Table 4 Changes to NCEA and University Entrance in 2020¹⁶³

	Learner recognition credits	Course endorsement requirement	Certificate endorsement requirement	University Entrance (UE)	Exams and portfolio due dates
Normal year		14 credits	50 credits	14 credits in three UE approved subjects	
Students in Auckland	1 earned for every 4 achieved through assessment	12 credits	44 credits	12 credits in three UE approved subjects	Delayed
Students outside Auckland	1 earned for every 5 achieved through assessment	12 credits	46 credits	12 credits in three UE approved subjects	Delayed

Source: NZQA

In the 2021 academic year the disruption to learning and assessments became more widespread. There were again different tiers of support, depending on learner location, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Changes to NCEA and University Entrance in 2021¹⁶⁴

	Learner recognition credits	Course endorsement requirement	Certificate endorsement requirement	University Entrance (UE)	Exams and portfolio due dates
Normal year		14 credits	50 credits	14 credits in three UE approved subjects	
Students outside Auckland, Northland and Waikato	1 earned for every 5 achieved through assessment	14 credits	50 credits	14 credits in three UE approved subjects	Delayed
Students in Auckland	1 earned for every 4 achieved through assessment	12 credits	44 credits	12 credits in three UE approved subjects	Delayed
Students in Northland and Waikato	1 earned for every 5 achieved through assessment	12 credits	46 credits	14 credits in three UE approved subjects	Delayed

Source: NZQA

In 2021, students in Auckland, Northland and Waikato were eligible for an Unexpected Event Grade (UEG). Students applied for a UEG and submitted to NZQA their mock exam results or an average mark from internal tests and assignments from throughout the year. If a student decided to sit an end-of-year exam despite applying for an UEG, they were awarded whichever mark was higher. More than 40% of students in Auckland, Northland and Waikato did not sit end-of-year NCEA exams in 2021.¹⁶⁵

The 2022 school year has again been disrupted. Changes were again put in place in an attempt to ensure fairness for learners, as shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Changes to NCEA and University Entrance in 2022¹⁶⁶

	Learner recognition credits	Course endorsement requirement	Certificate endorsement requirement	University Entrance (UE)	Exams and portfolio due dates
Normal year		14 credits	50 credits	14 credits in three UE approved subjects	
All NZ students	1 earned for every 5 achieved through assessment	14 credits	46 credits	14 credits in two UE approved subjects, 12 credits in a third	Exams as scheduled; portfolio dates put back

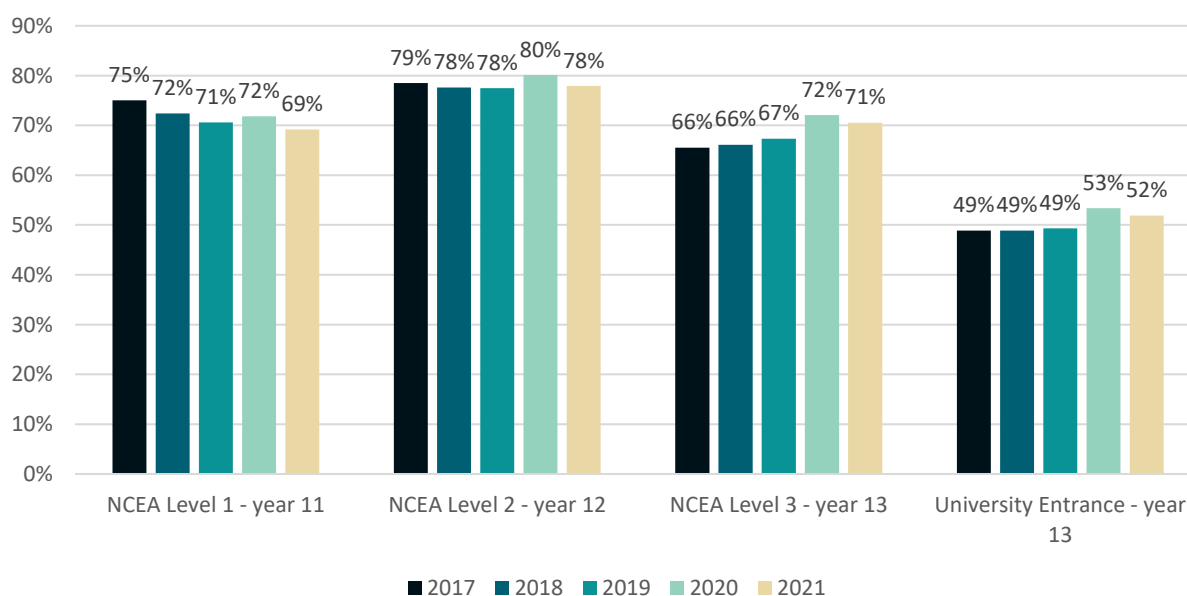
Source: NZQA

Impact of changes to assessment

The data in the chart in Figure 13 below highlights student attainment from 2017 to 2021. There was a rise in attainment at all levels between 2019 and 2020, although attainment rates fell back again, to some extent, in 2021. Therefore, 2021 attainment of NCEA and University Entrance is slightly lower than 2020, but similar to or higher than 2019.¹⁶⁷

However, NZQA states that, due to the different processes in place during the pandemic, caution should be exercised when comparing 2020 and 2021 attainment data with previous years.¹⁶⁸

Figure 13 NCEA and UE attainment, 2017 to 2021



Source: NZQA

Attainment data for 2022 will be published later in 2023.

Reaction to changes

There was some coverage of the fact that, despite continued COVID-19 disruption in 2022, support such as the Unexpected Event Grade (UEG) was removed.¹⁶⁹

Future plans

Over the next few years, the NCEA will transition from its current form to a new qualification with new achievement standards.¹⁷⁰ However, these are long-planned changes and not specifically related to COVID-19.

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.

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 these 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 that continue to use the G–A* 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 since September 2012, and linear GCSEs (where assessment is through examinations taken only at the end of the two-year period).
- ◆ Where GCSEs are modular, students 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 covering assessment design and delivery, and the determination and issuing of results. Individual schools and colleges choose the A 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, whether in Northern Ireland, England or Wales, for different subjects.

AS level passes are graded on a five-point scale: A, B, C, D, E (where A is highest). There is a six-point scale for A level passes: A*, A, B, C, D, E. The grade U denotes a fail. A 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.¹⁷¹

Changes to exams and assessment

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 concern¹⁷² 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 Minister of Education suggested that this would give more weight to the professional judgement of teachers.¹⁷³ 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.

In 2022, exams took place again for the first time since 2019. CCEA said that it had worked with principals and other stakeholders to seek ways in which the burden of the pandemic on students could be alleviated. After consultation and engagement, adaptations were put in place whereby in the vast majority of subjects, students had the opportunity to omit an assessment unit. This reduced the number of examinations that candidates were required to take in 2022. If a student wished to take all assessment units, they would be awarded the higher of the two outcomes as their grade.

Ofqual has announced that in 2022 exams boards will set grade boundaries using a midway point between pre-pandemic (or 2019) outcomes and 2021 outcomes. Qualifications Wales has announced its intention to follow the same approach. CCEA will take the approaches adopted by the other regulators into account, and shares their wish to ensure that outcomes in 2022 are higher than those of pre-pandemic years, given the significant challenges faced by students.¹⁷⁴

In a statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Minister of Education stated:

My department will [...] continue to work closely with colleagues in England and Wales on grading standards. While decisions on standards will be taken together across all three jurisdictions, I give you an assurance that generous grading will form part of the arrangements for 2022.¹⁷⁵

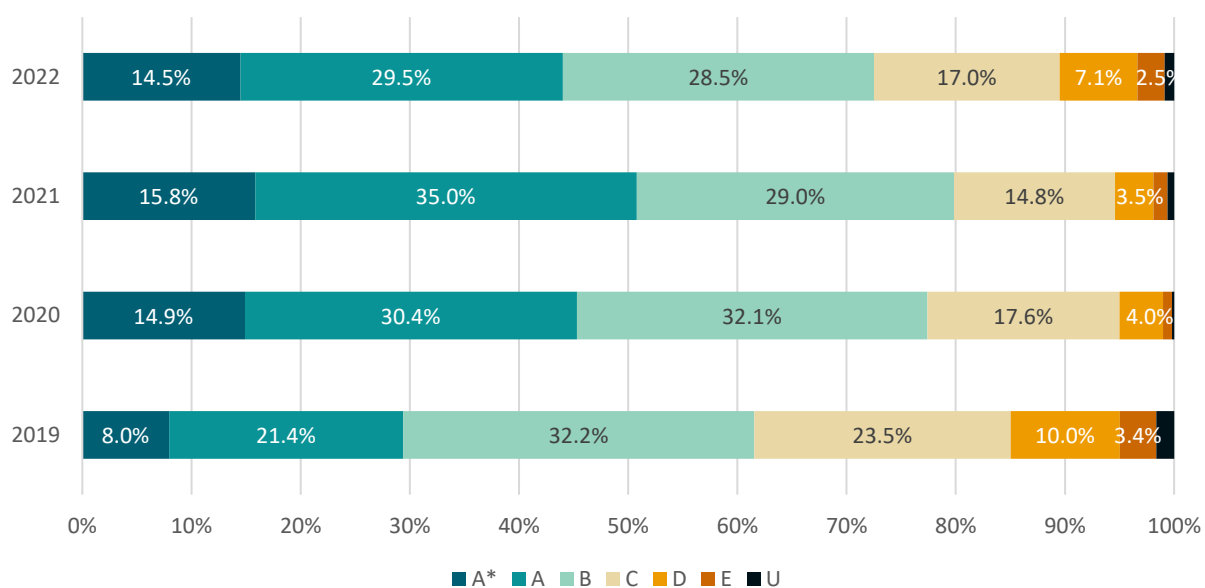
Contingency measures were also put in place.¹⁷⁶

Impact of changes to assessment

There was a fall in the number of A level entries in Northern Ireland awarded A* and A grades in 2022 following the return of exams. However, the proportion of top grades remains much higher than in 2019, when there were last exams, as can be seen in the chart in Figure 14 below.

The proportion of entries that got an A or A* grades was 44% in 2022, compared to 29.4% in 2019. However, this proportion was lower than the 45.3% and 50.8% of 2020 and 2021, respectively.

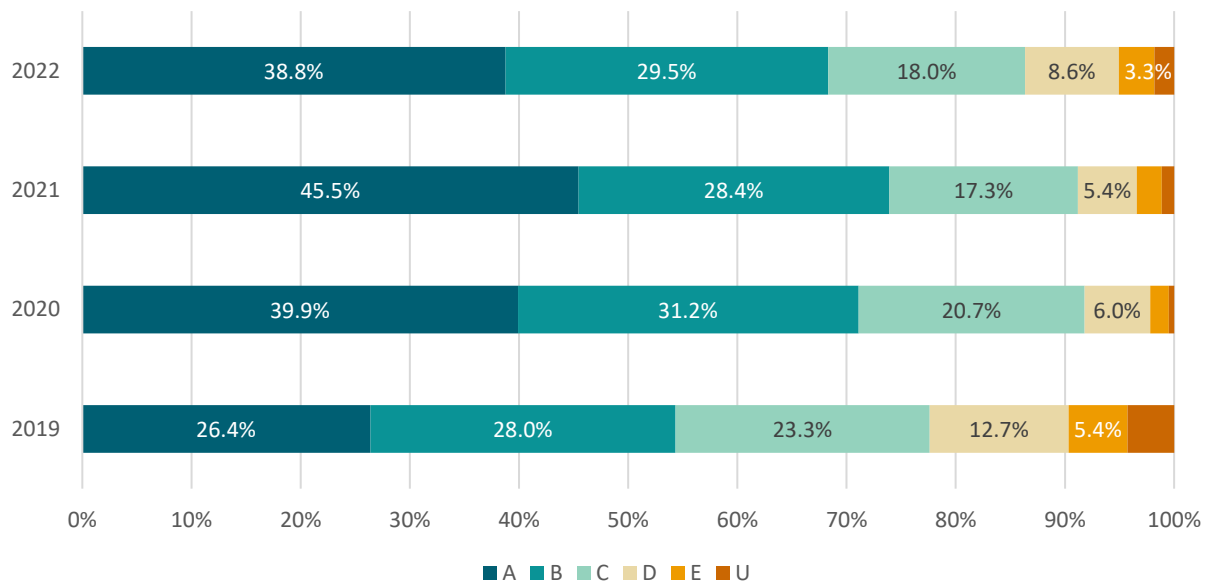
Figure 14 Northern Ireland A level grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

At AS level in 2022, as can be seen in the chart in Figure 15 below, 38.8% of entries received an A grade, up 12pp on 2019 but down 1pp on 2020 and 7pp on 2021. Likewise, 86.3% of entries recorded an A–C grade pass in 2022, 9pp higher than in 2019, but 6pp and 5pp lower than 2020 and 2021, respectively.

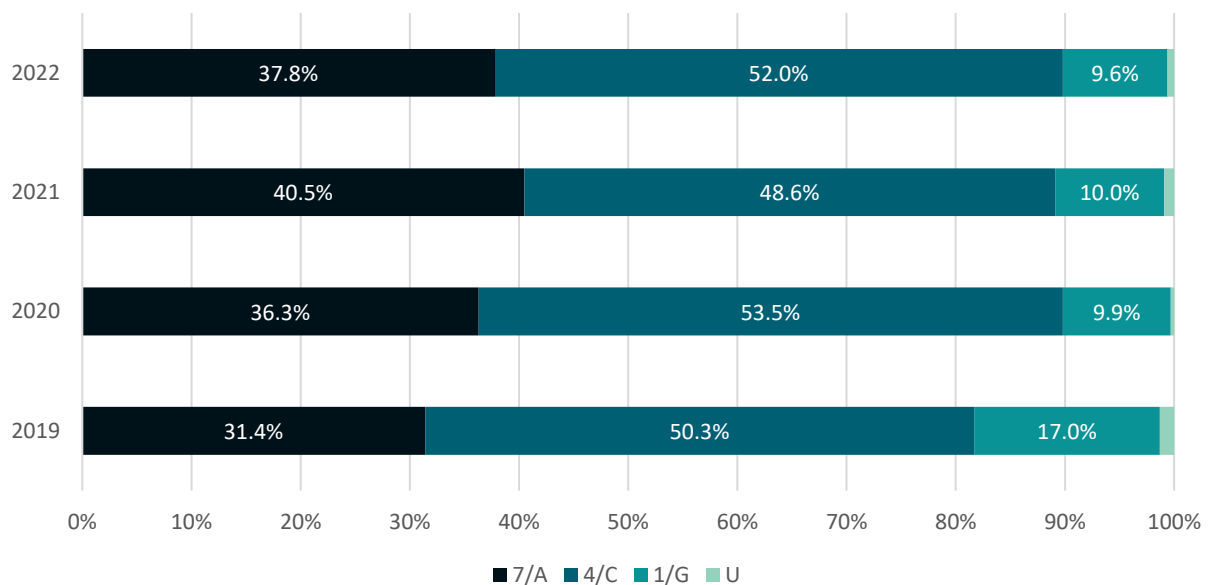
Figure 15 Northern Ireland AS level grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

The figures for GCSE, in Figure 16 below, show that in Northern Ireland 37.8% of students received a grade A/7 in 2022, compared to 31.4% when exams were last sat in 2019. Outcomes at grade C/4 and above were received by 89.8% of students, compared to 81.7% in 2019.

Figure 16 Northern Ireland GCSE grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

A record proportion of 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland have applied to start university in 2022, according to UCAS. More than half (52.8%) of all 18-year-olds in Northern Ireland applied to UCAS by 30 June 2022, up from 52.3% in 2021 and 48.2% in 2020. This is likely to lead to increased competition for university places in some popular subjects.¹⁷⁷

This increase in university applications has coincided with a decrease in the number of Northern Ireland students attending FE colleges. Analysis has shown that this can, in part, be attributed to the more generous grades awarded over the COVID-19 period.¹⁷⁸

Reaction to changes

Reaction to Northern Ireland's results was relatively muted, and focused, generally, on the higher attainment rate compared to England and Wales. There was some comment that attainment still remains substantially higher than in 2019.

Future plans

Some modifications will remain in place for 2023. While the unit omissions put in place in 2022 will not be used again — and therefore assessment will cover the whole content of the course — advance notification of assessment topics will be issued.

In arrangements similar to those announced for Scotland and Wales, advance information will be communicated, before exams, on some aspects of the specification that will be assessed in the examination papers. It is intended to help learners and schools focus revision and preparation by providing information about the broad areas of the specification that will be assessed in each examination.¹⁷⁹

Education Minister Michelle McIlveen said:

*Arrangements for next year's qualifications acknowledge the unprecedented disruption our education system has faced and aim to support recovery. Advance information about the broad areas to be assessed in each examination will provide important support to learners, increasing their confidence and aiding their revision. Unit omissions proved helpful in supporting a return to public exams this year, but I do not consider it in the best interests of our learners to continue with this approach for a further year. In 2023, learners will therefore be assessed across the full specification for each qualification.*¹⁸⁰

Moreover, a Qualifications Support Programme has been put in place to support students preparing for exams in 2023.¹⁸¹

Norway

Context

Norway uses a mixture of internal and external assessment for school students, but 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 exam is in Norwegian. In other subjects, both centrally- and locally-devised (often practical or oral) exams 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.^{182,183}

Changes to exams and assessment

In 2020 written and oral examinations were cancelled. Instead of examinations, school-based assessments of students' performance across the school year informed all final grades. 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'.¹⁸⁴

In 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.¹⁸⁵

Due to the ongoing effects of the pandemic, most exams for students in upper secondary school were again cancelled in 2022. Oral exams for some high school students, however, proceeded as planned.¹⁸⁶

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 teacher assessment counting for 80%. Grades were issued without major disruption.¹⁸⁷

However, despite this relatively straightforward move to Norway's grades being based solely on teacher continuous assessment, grade point averages have increased since before the pandemic. 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.¹⁸⁸

Grade point averages in 2022 were largely unchanged from 2021. In a minority of subjects, the average grade dropped slightly from last year.¹⁸⁹

Reaction to changes

The decision to cancel exams for the third year in a row was greeted with surprise by some but welcomed by others.¹⁹⁰

Future plans

The Norwegian Directorate of Education is assessing its current system of assessment and looking at possible alternatives. This has led to reports that examinations may be scrapped

entirely. Professor and assessment researcher, Tony Burner, from the University of Southeast Norway explained:

Many teachers say they got more time for teaching and mid-term assessment after exams were cancelled. And many students have experienced less stress.¹⁹¹

However, the Norwegian Teachers' Association was more cautious about the prospect of the permanent removal of exams. The association's leader said that exams are an essential part of a comprehensive assessment system but conceded there needed to be discussions on how exams can be adapted to be more fit for purpose.

Ontario

Context

Teacher assessment is the basis of certification in Ontario. Assessment of upper-secondary school students 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.¹⁹² There are no province-wide subject exams, although there are standardised literacy and mathematics tests.¹⁹³

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). 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.¹⁹⁴

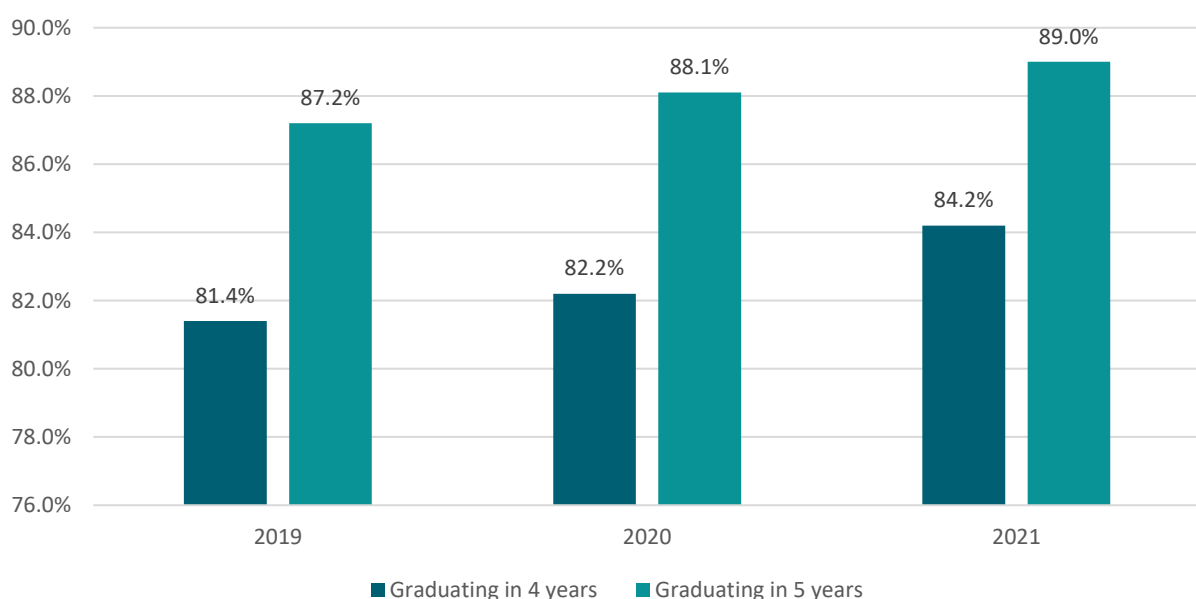
Changes to exams and assessment

Assessment in Ontario is largely decentralised and therefore can be flexible. Ontario was able to adapt relatively easily to school closures and examination cancellation during the pandemic. Measures were put in place to help mitigate learning disruption as much as possible. However, students graduating in 2022 were exempt from the OSSLT graduation requirement.¹⁹⁵

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. Figure 17 below summarises the figures for 2019–21.

Figure 17 OSSD graduation rates, 2019 to 2021



Source: Ontario Ministry of Education

The 2020 and 2021 rates have increased from pre-pandemic levels, but the graduation rates for 2022 have not yet been published.¹⁹⁶

Reaction to changes

In a news article in February 2022, Canada's approach to final exams was described as patchy; some Canadian schools had decided to freeze student grades where they were before the winter break, or to remove final exams in response to the Omicron wave, but some had not.¹⁹⁷ The resulting inconsistency caused concern about an uneven playing field and worries about perceived grade inflation.

There were calls for Ontario to provide consistent assessment and evaluation guidance for all school boards. One school board said:

*There is significant concern that inconsistent assessment practises across the province will unfairly disadvantage students.*¹⁹⁸

In particular, there were concerns that schools freezing marks where they were before the winter break was based on messages from the Ministry of Education for 2019–20, but not for 2020–21 or 2021–22.

Future plans

The OSSLT graduation requirement (from which students graduating in 2022 were exempt) will be restored for students graduating in 2023.¹⁹⁹

It has been argued that reforming assessment in Ontario could be a benefit arising from the pandemic.²⁰⁰

*It's very hard to think of anything positive coming out of COVID, but if it's made us rethink our approaches to how we assess and evaluate students, that's a positive thing. Ultimately, we need to start thinking about assessment that is much more aligned with what actually students need to be able to know and do in a 21st-century economy.*²⁰¹

Queensland

Context

The 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 for Queensland's education community.

Queensland traditionally provided an example of a wholly internally-assessed system. However, since 2020, there has been a shift towards more external assessment. Now, for most general subjects, internal assessment²⁰² makes up 75% of a candidate's mark (three assessments) and external assessment²⁰³ 25% (one assessment). For Mathematics and Science, however, internal assessment is worth only 50% of the final mark. On the other hand, all applied subjects continue to be wholly internally assessed (four assessments).²⁰⁴ Internal assessments are developed and marked by schools, but endorsed by QCAA.²⁰⁵ Moreover, QCAA reviews samples of student work for every subject in every school to ensure the quality and rigour of assessment and results. External assessment for each subject is held on the same day in all schools across the state.²⁰⁶

The Queensland Certificate of Education (QCE)²⁰⁷ is Queensland's senior school qualification, awarded to eligible students, usually at the end of Year 12. 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. From 2020, to apply for university a student must achieve a satisfactory Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank (ATAR) score.²⁰⁸

Changes to exams and assessment

In 2020, as a result of the interruption to learning for students during the April and May lockdown, 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: one external and two internal assessments.

In 2021, short-term snap local lockdown restrictions were applied across Queensland, but there was only one state-wide lockdown during the academic year. Assessments went ahead as scheduled in October and November 2021. The new assessment model was fully implemented — that is, the four summative assessments comprising three internal and one external.

The 2022 session, with exams in October and November, proceeded as scheduled.²⁰⁹

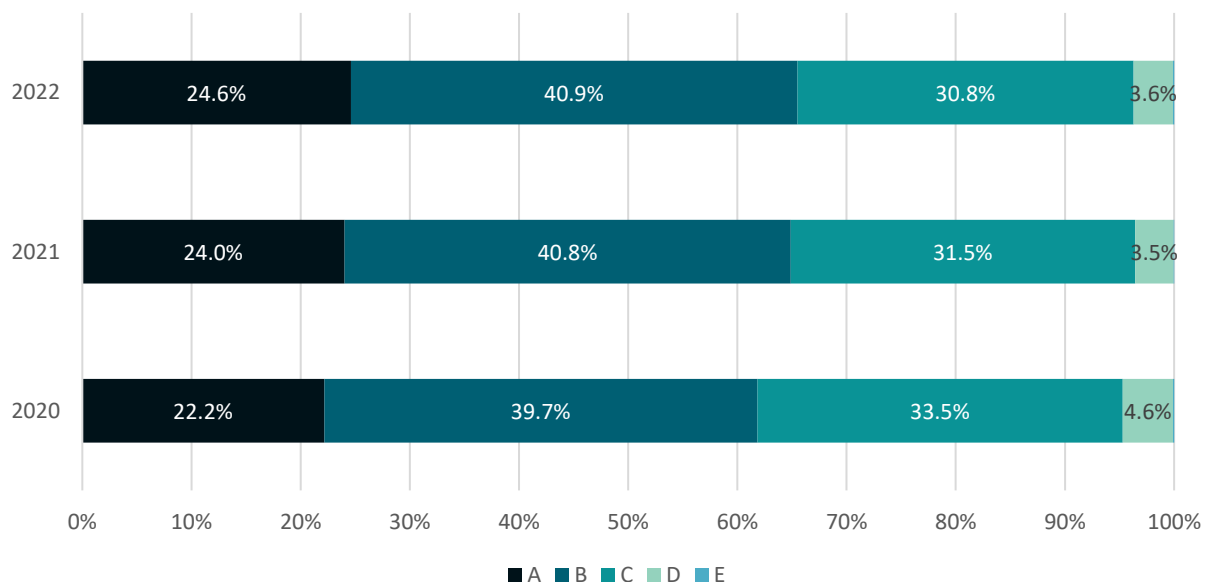
Impact of changes to assessment

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

Furthermore, the introduction of the new QCE system in 2019 involved changes to the QCAA's curriculum, assessment and certification policies and procedures. Therefore, data

on cohorts' attainment since 2020 cannot be compared with the attainment of previous cohorts.

Figure 18 Year 12 QCE general subject external examination grade distributions, 2020 to 2022



Source: QCAA

Reaction to changes

Over the pandemic, concerns in Queensland appear to have centred on the wider effects of COVID-19 and lockdown, rather than specifically on the impacts of (relatively minor) pandemic-enforced changes to assessment and certification.

Future plans

QCAA conducted a post-cycle review of the new QCE system following its first year of implementation. The review aimed to identify the elements of the new system that were implemented effectively and those that experienced challenges. Some of these challenges resulted from COVID-19, but the review was not specifically about the pandemic.²¹⁰

An independent review of the new QCE system will begin in 2022, but again this focus is on the new arrangements rather than as a result of the pandemic.

Scotland

Context

Learners in upper secondary education in schools and colleges may take a number of National Courses leading to National Qualifications — including National 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 coursework component(s). 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(s), weighted as appropriate.

Changes to exams and assessment

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 a rank order for students within each grade band for each subject. These grades were then moderated by SQA, with appeals possible 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-certificated 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 SQA working with the National Qualifications 2021 Group of stakeholders. The ACM was based on demonstrated attainment. Schools and colleges assessed learner evidence, provided feedback to learners on progress, and carried out 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 results in June 2021 and SQA issued certificates in August.²¹³

In 2022, exams were held for the first time since 2019. This return to national assessments was supported by a package of measures including modifications to course assessment and revision support. A more generous approach to grading than in a normal year was put in

place to allow for the impact of the pandemic on learners when determining grade boundaries, while maintaining standards and credibility of qualifications.

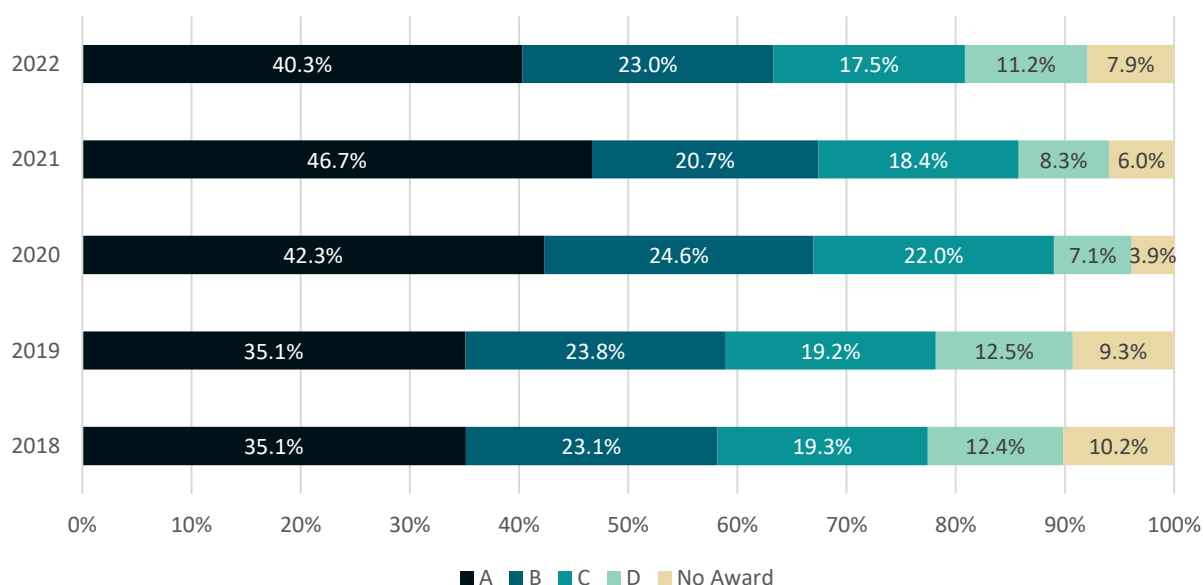
In order to cover COVID-related disruption, the Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) included a new detailed reason for 2022 — for learners who were required to self-isolate or stay at home on the day of the exam in line with public health guidance at the time. As with 2021, there was a free of charge appeals service that allowed learners or their representatives to appeal directly to SQA, or through their centre.²¹⁴

Impact of changes to assessment

The models used in 2020 and 2021 to determine estimates for learners were based on teacher judgement of evidence of demonstrated attainment. For this reason, outcomes for these years reflect the different methods of assessment, compared to years where SQA assessments, including examinations and coursework, are used, with grade boundaries set with respect to national performance standards based on expert judgement.²¹⁵

As shown in Figure 19 below, National 5 grade A attainment was 40.3% in 2022: 6.4pp lower than in 2021, but 5.2pp higher than in 2019. Grade A to C attainment was 80.8% in 2022: 5pp lower than in 2021, but 2.6pp up on 2019.

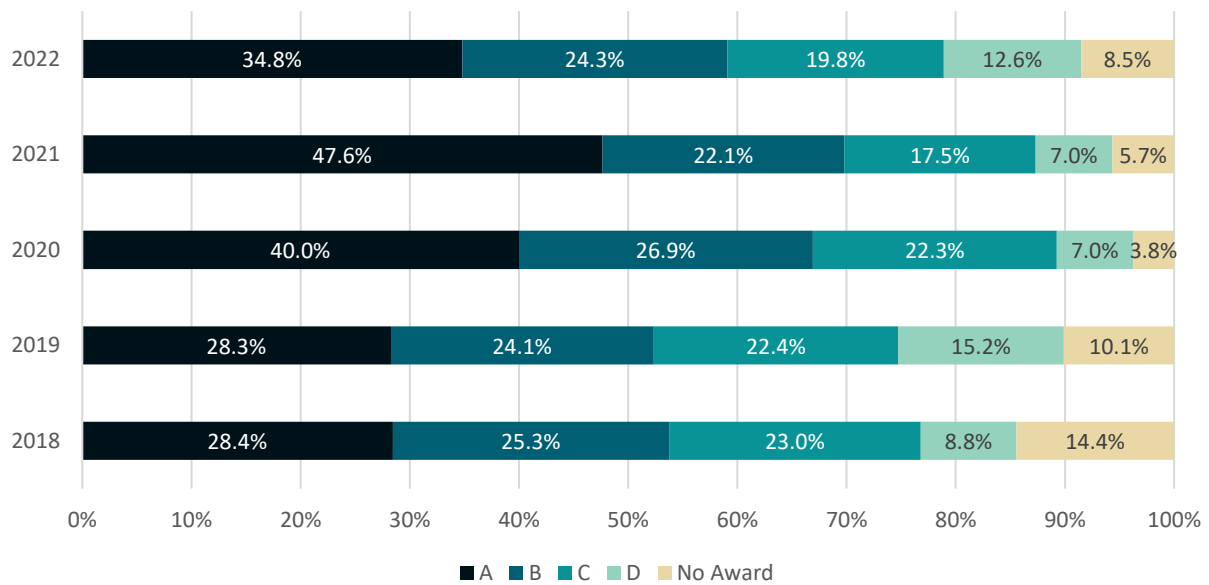
Figure 19 National 5 grade distributions, 2018 to 2022



Source: SQA

In 2022, as shown in Figure 20 below, grade A to C attainment at Higher was 78.9%. This is 8.4pp down on 2021, but still 4.1pp higher than in 2019, when exams were last held. Grade A attainment was 34.8% in 2022 compared to 47.6% in 2021 and 28.3% in 2019.

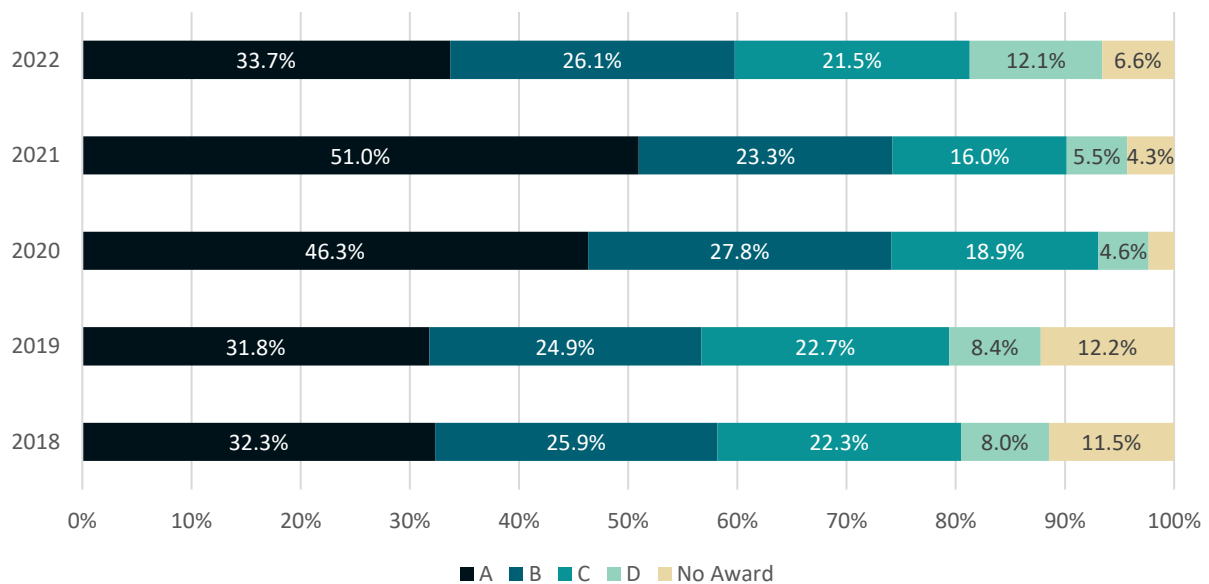
Figure 20 Higher grade distributions, 2018 to 2022



Source: SQA

As shown in Figure 21 below, Advanced Higher grade A attainment in 2022 was 33.7%, a decrease of 17.3pp from 2021’s high. Grade A to C attainment was 81.3%, down from 90.2% in 2021, but up from 79.4% in 2019.

Figure 21 Advanced Higher grade distributions, 2018 to 2022



Source: SQA

Reaction to changes

There was media comment on the increase between 2021 and 2022 in the gap in attainment between learners from the most deprived and least deprived areas.²¹⁶ The Higher grade A–C (pass) rate for those living in the 20% most deprived areas was 70.2%, compared with 85.1% from those from the 20% least deprived areas. This difference was greater than that

in 2021, when those from the 20% most deprived areas recorded a pass rate of 83.2% and those from the least deprived areas recorded a pass rate of 91%.

However, the Scottish Government emphasised the comparison with 2019 data, the last year exams were held, stating that the 2022 gap was narrower than in 2019. At Higher, the 2022 gap was 15pp, compared to 16.9pp in 2019. Nonetheless, the Education Secretary said:

While the results show the gap between attainment levels in the least and most deprived areas has narrowed from the 2019 level, we know that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted learners from more disadvantaged backgrounds.²¹⁷

There was also some, relatively muted, media commentary around the decrease in pass rates compared to 2020 and 2021, representing a rowing back of grade inflation, and how this marked a gradual return to pre-pandemic levels and norms.²¹⁸ The proportionally greater decreases in attainment rates between 2021 and 2022 in Scotland compared to England may account for the lack of coverage around perceived grade inflation issues in Scotland compared to south of the border.

Future plans

Modifications were made to assessments in 2022 for National 5, Higher, and Advanced Higher courses to maximise time for teaching and learning and mitigate disruption due to the pandemic, and these remain in place for 2023.²¹⁹

In wider developments, an Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments designed to recognise the achievements of all of Scotland's learners, led by Professor Louise Hayward, was announced in October 2021. This was announced, in part, because of renewed debate around assessment in Scotland as a result of the cancellation of exams in 2020 and 2021. It is expected that externally marked exams will remain part of any new system of qualifications and assessment.²²⁰

SQA's evaluation of the 2022 approach to assessment, in line with the evaluation of the 2021 ACM,²²¹ has gathered practitioner and learner views on the process and will provide valuable insight for the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessment.

Singapore

Context

While teachers in Singapore undertake continuous assessment of their students at all levels of education, it is still an exam-oriented culture with high-stakes assessments.²²² 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.

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 N-level exams after four years of study or O-level exams after five years. Students who wish to study at university take A level exams after an additional two years of study.²²³

Changes to exams and assessment

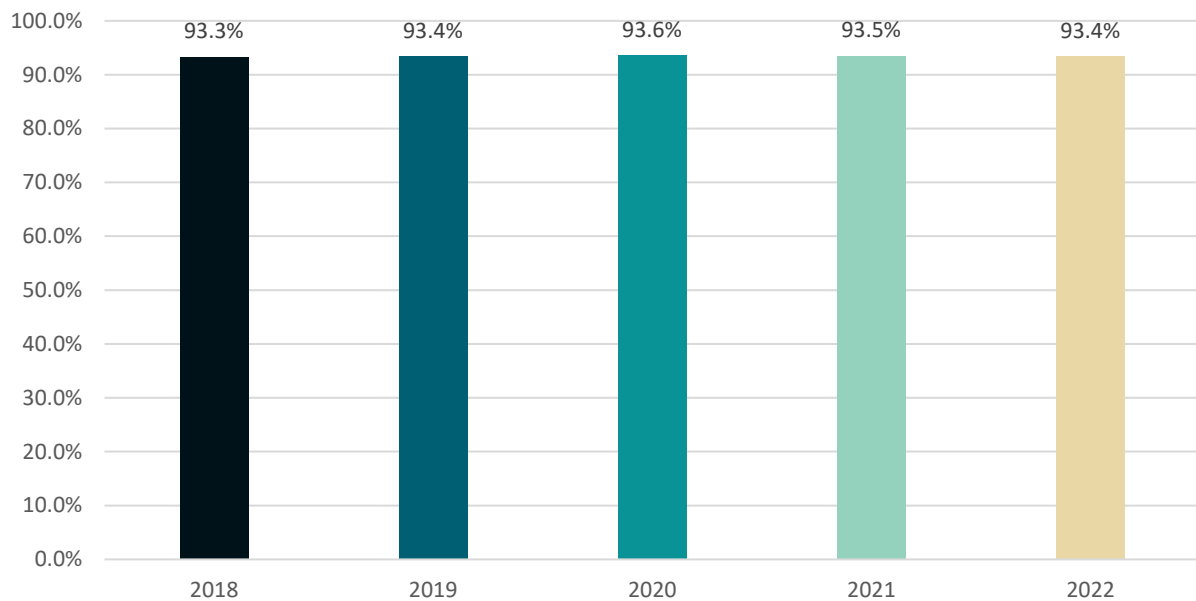
Singapore's response to COVID-19 was swift.²²⁴ After an incremental and adaptive approach to school management in February and March 2020, Singapore moved to a home-based model in April. Face-to-face learning resumed as soon as the first wave was over. The government's agile policy response, including blended learning and moving school holidays forward, meant that Singapore successfully provided a high number of school days to its students in 2020.²²⁵ 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.²²⁶

Exams and assessments continued during the pandemic in line, largely, with previous years, and continue in 2022 as scheduled. Exams take place in September, October, and November. The Ministry of Education (MOE) stated that they made the decision to continue with the pre-existing exam schedule to lessen disruption to student learning and promote student progression.²²⁷ Additional safety precautions to mitigate the spread of infection were introduced to all schools in 2020 and continued into 2021.²²⁸ In 2022, as in any other year, candidates who were unable to sit the examination — including for COVID-19 related reasons — could apply for special consideration.²²⁹

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, 2021 and 2022 are in line with recent years.^{230,231}

Figure 22 Proportion of students attaining at least three H2 passes at A level, 2018 to 2022



Source: SEAB

Reaction to changes

Singapore's national examinations went ahead (with some adaptations to arrangements in 2020 and 2021). There seems to have been little controversy attached to Singapore's assessment and certification approaches over the pandemic period.

Future plans

It has been argued that in Singapore the pandemic has catalysed a shift in learning that had already begun, from a 'one-size-fits-all' to a more differentiated and customised learning approach.²³² Since the pandemic, there has been an increase in coursework assessments in Singapore schools. The marks from these assessments now count towards a candidate's final exam result.²³³

Before COVID-19, Singapore had already initiated a change to their education system, with a drive towards independent and self-directed learning. The pandemic appears to have hastened these changes, with more online learning and assessment, increased opportunities for self-directed study, and a vision for the future where pedagogical methods are more facilitative and less didactic.

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 being WJEC.

Some GCSEs in Wales are linear, with timed examinations which are externally set and marked, and are 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. 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'.

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 level 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 highest). There is a six-point scale for A level passes: A*, A, B, C, D, E. The grade U denotes a fail.²³⁴

Changes to exams and assessment

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. 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.²³⁵

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, WJEC and the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ).²³⁶ 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.²³⁷

For 2022, Qualifications Wales confirmed in summer 2021 that GCSE, AS and A level qualifications would be assessed as normal, but with adaptations²³⁸ in place to take account of and mitigate the continuing effects of COVID. (Contingency plans were put in place to use the 2021 awarding process again if required.)

Qualifications Wales set out principles to be followed in making adaptations:

1. WJEC must seek to ensure that learners are not advantaged or disadvantaged relative to their peers in other jurisdictions.
2. WJEC must seek to ensure that all qualifications are a reliable indication of the knowledge, skills and understanding specified in the qualification following any adaptations to assessments.
3. WJEC must seek to ensure that qualification content, in general, is not reduced; however, content can be restructured so it can reasonably be streamlined, such as in relation to optional units.
4. WJEC must seek to ensure that the manageability of assessment is maximised, where this will allow for an increase in teaching time in order to minimise the impact on outcomes.
5. WJEC must seek to maintain standards, as far as possible, within the same qualification in line with previous years.
6. WJEC must seek to maintain standards, as far as possible, across similar qualifications made available by WJEC and by other awarding bodies.
7. WJEC must seek to ensure that flexibility in the delivery of assessments is maximised so as to reduce the impact of disruption, illness, or quarantine, including lockdown at a local level.

Qualifications Wales also stated that WJEC must strike an appropriate balance between maintaining the validity of the qualification and making adaptations to assessments in order to minimise the impact of the pandemic on learners.

Adaptations to non-examination assessment (NEA) included:

- ◆ streamlined content to be assessed
- ◆ reduced NEA requirements
- ◆ optionality in assessment, either via a choice of units or a choice of questions within units²³⁹

The controls under which NEA must be conducted were also relaxed for 2022. In qualifications where it was difficult to provide the adaptations above, WJEC released advance information.²⁴⁰

Qualifications Wales decided to align with the approach taken in England to ensure that learners in Wales were not disadvantaged relative to learners in England, particularly where qualifications are used to progress to higher education. As a result, exams were graded more generously than in pre-COVID years.²⁴¹

*...Treat 2022 as a transition year to reflect that we are in a pandemic recovery period and learners' education has been disrupted. In 2022, we will aim, therefore, for results to reflect broadly a midway point between 2021 and 2019. In 2023 we will aim to return to results that are in line with those in pre-pandemic years.*²⁴²

Impact of changes to assessment

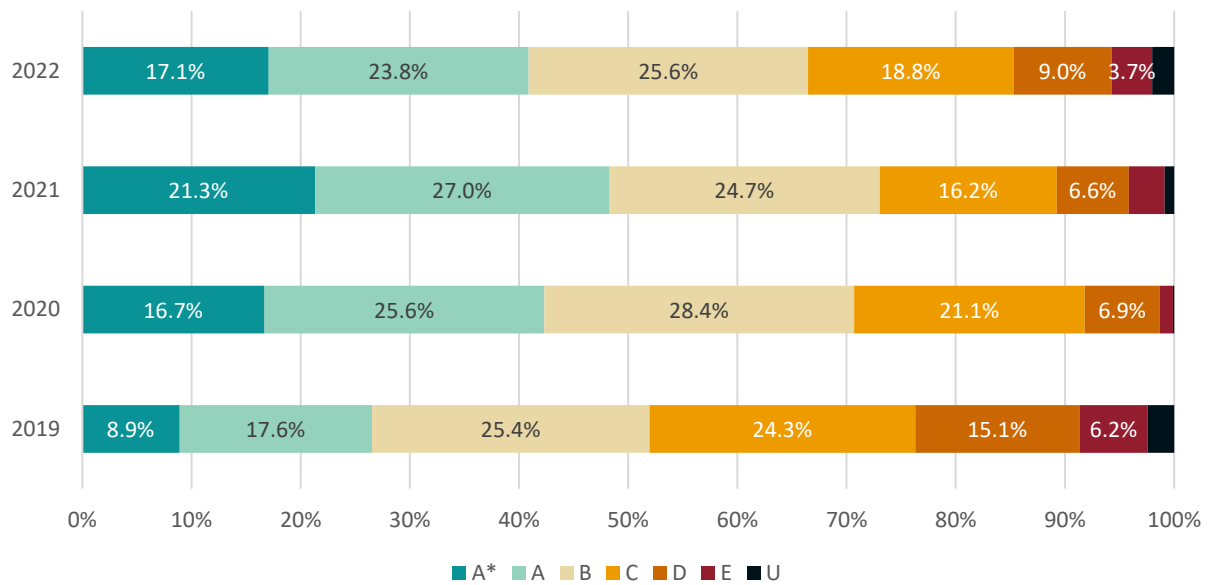
The assessment arrangements in 2020 and again in 2021 were quite unlike those typically used. Consequently, outcomes looked different from previous years. Due to the different awarding arrangements that took place, results in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022 are not directly comparable to each other. It is important to remember this and take care when comparing grade distributions.

2022 saw a return to more normal procedures in Wales, albeit with adaptations and generous grading in place.

The chart in Figure 23 below shows Welsh A level grade distributions from 2019 to 2022. In 2022:

- ◆ 17.1% of awards were at grade A*; this is 8.2pp higher than when exams were last sat in 2019, but 4.2pp lower than in 2021
- ◆ The proportion of grades A*–A was 40.9%; while this was down 7.4pp on 2021, it is still 14.4pp higher than in 2019
- ◆ Outcomes at grades A*–E were 98.0% — up 0.4pp on 2019 but down 1.1pp on 2021

Figure 23 Wales A level grade distributions, 2019 to 2022

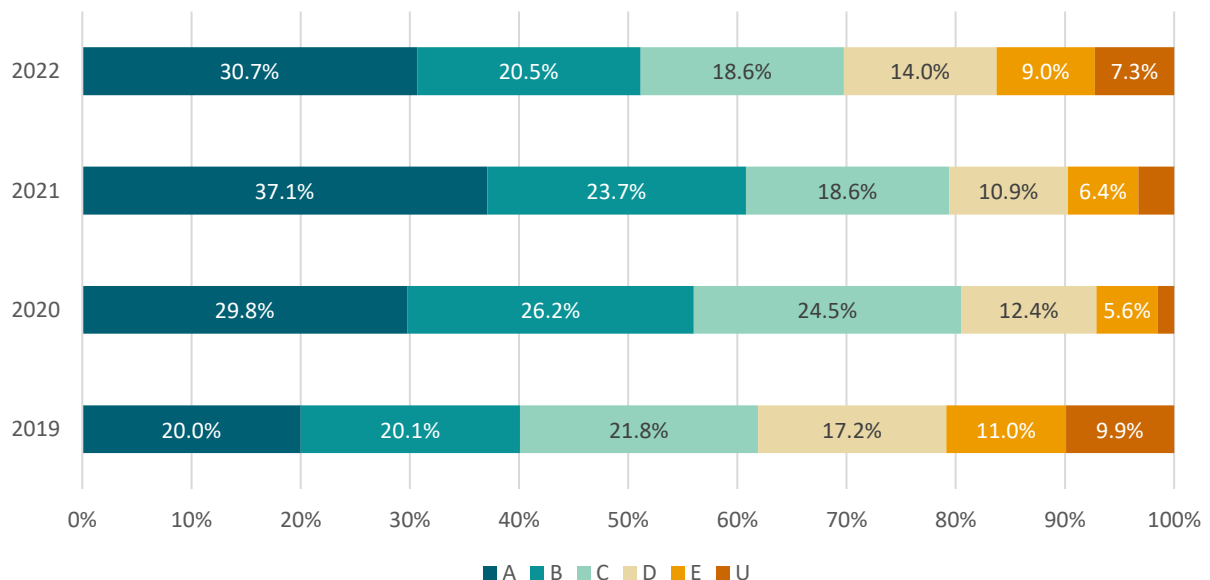


Source: JCQ

The chart in Figure 24 below shows Welsh AS level grade distributions over the past four years. Again, outcomes remain higher than in 2019 but are down on 2021.

- ◆ Outcomes at grade A, at 30.7%, were up 10.7pp on 2019 but down 6.4pp from 2021.
- ◆ Outcomes at grade E and above were 92.7% — up 2.7pp on 2019, but down 4.0pp on 2021.

Figure 24 Wales AS level grade distributions, 2019 to 2022

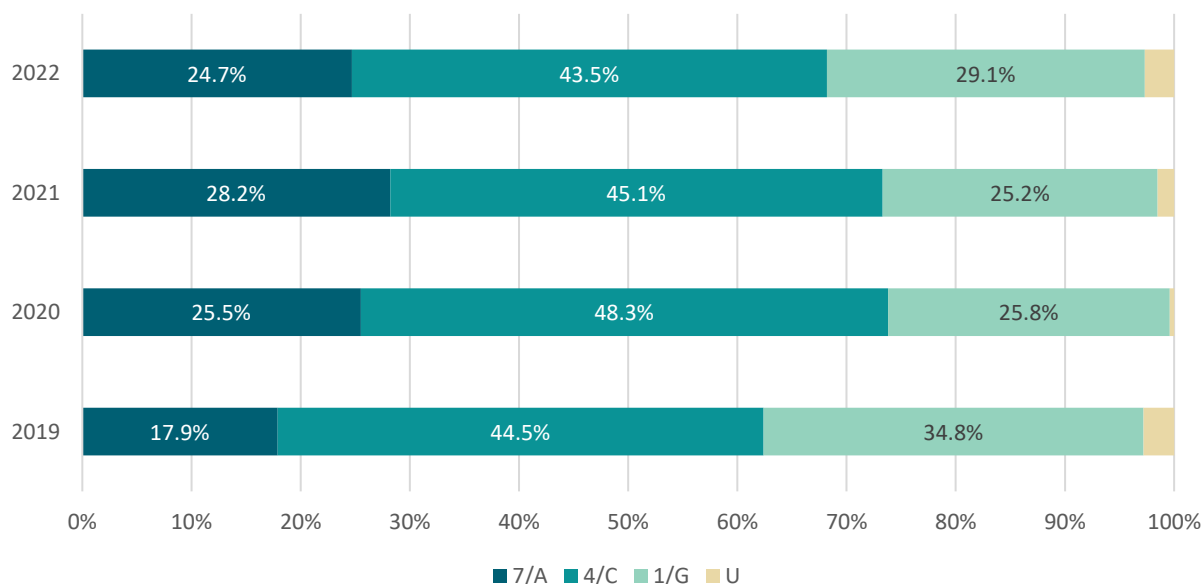


Source: JCQ

The chart in Figure 25 below shows Welsh GCSE grade distributions from 2019 to 2022.

- ◆ Outcomes at grade 7/A and above, at 24.7%, were up 6.8pp on 2019 but down 3.5pp from 2021.
- ◆ Outcomes at grade 4/C and above were 68.2% — up 5.8pp on 2019, but down 5.1pp on 2021.

Figure 25 Wales GCSE grade distributions, 2019 to 2022



Source: JCQ

Attainment gaps

Regarding attainment gaps (differences in results achieved by different groups of learners) Qualifications Wales stated that, compared to 2019, attainment gaps in 2021 were generally greater at grade A* and grades A*–A and narrower at grade C.²⁴³ This changed somewhat with the return to exams in 2022.

At GCSE in 2022, the gap between boys and girls narrowed over 2021 at grades A*–A and grades A*–C, and remains negligible at grades A*–G, with girls still achieving better outcomes than boys in all three grade ranges.

At GCSE in 2022, the gap between students eligible for free school meals and those not eligible widened at grades A*–C and grades A*–G, but narrowed at grades A*–A. Students not eligible for free school meals achieved better outcomes than students eligible for free school meals at all three grade ranges.

At GCSE in 2022, the gap between White British students and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students widened at grade ranges A*–A and A*–C, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic students achieving better outcomes than White British students.

At A level in 2022, the gap between boys and girls narrowed at grades A*–A and grades A*–C, with girls achieving better outcomes than boys at grades A*–C.

At A level in 2022, the gap between White British students and Black, Asian and minority ethnic students widened at grades A*–A, with Black, Asian and minority ethnic students achieving better outcomes than White British students.²⁴⁴

Reaction to changes

During the examination period 2022, there were media reports of issues with exam papers, such as missing parts of exams,²⁴⁵ or unreasonably difficult questions, including content that students were told would not be included.²⁴⁶

In a letter to the Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee, WJEC stated that any issues had been taken into account in grading procedures.²⁴⁷ Qualifications Wales also said in their letter to the Committee that any issues were addressed through the grade boundary setting procedure, and stated that:

*In general, there was no evidence from the awarding process that question papers were significantly more demanding this year than any other, though learners may have found them more challenging given the exceptional context for this year's exams.*²⁴⁸

However, they recognised a specific issue with a question in Unit 1 AS level Mathematics, where '*while the question was within the scope of the overall requirements of the specification, the specific requirements of the question could be interpreted as having been removed by the adaptations*'. A slightly lower grade boundary was set for this paper.

However, in general, reaction to the 2022 awarding procedures was muted, particularly compared to the reactions to the two previous years. As in England, there was something of a media focus on Qualifications Wales and WJEC attempting to 'rein in' grade inflation.²⁴⁹

Future plans

Qualifications Wales stated that the 2022 grading policy required that national outcomes at subject level were broadly midway between national subject outcomes for 2019 and 2021.

Qualifications Wales has confirmed that the intention in 2023 is for results to fall broadly midway between the 2019 and 2022 results. Advance information will support learners by giving them an indication of the topics, themes, texts or other content that they should expect in their exams. Qualifications Wales states that its main aim is to help learners focus their revision to support their preparation for exams and assessment.²⁵⁰

Philip Blaker, Chief Executive of Qualifications Wales, said:

After a challenging couple of years for the education system, everyone's effort and support for learners means we are moving back towards pre-pandemic approaches. As we continue on that journey, there will continue to be support into 2023 since we know the pandemic has had a long-term impact on learners. Most qualifications are delivered over two years, which means that some learners have already experienced disruption as they prepare for qualifications that will be completed this year. We continue to work closely with awarding bodies, other UK regulators, higher education institutions and other stakeholders to make sure that Welsh learners are not disadvantaged. It remains our priority that the grades

*learners achieve support their progression on to the next stage of their learning or employment.*²⁵¹

There has been a certain amount of reaction to this, indicating that some think that Welsh students being graded more generously than English ones will be unfair or cause confusion.²⁵² However, an Ofqual statement said:

*Education is a devolved matter, and other regulators take decisions in relation to their jurisdictions. GCSEs, AS and A levels in England and Wales are structured differently, and have been for a number of years. University admissions officers are used to dealing with qualifications from students from around the UK and all over the world that are designed and graded in different ways.*²⁵³

A Universities UK representative said,

*Universities are well practised at contextualising student backgrounds and experiences, and this year will be no different. It is important to stress that the 2023 cohort will not be disadvantaged compared to other years due to grading arrangements, or the region in which they live.*²⁵⁴

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