

UCAS response to the summer 2021 consultation on proposed changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels, and vocational and technical qualifications in 2021/22

UCAS is an independent charity that operates across the UK and internationally to provide information, advice, and admissions services to help students to progress to the next stage of education and learning. This service spans undergraduate, postgraduate, technical, and apprenticeship pathways, with the undergraduate service alone supporting over 700,000 students a year from over 200 countries and territories, with more than 400 different verified qualifications, to access UK higher education (HE).

This document provides a response to the parallel consultations the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofqual are conducting on changes to the assessment of GCSEs, AS and A levels and vocational and technical qualifications in 2021-22. It focuses on matters that need to be addressed across the parallel consultations to ensure all who are involved with the assessment and awarding of qualifications in the next academic year and beyond – particularly students, apprentices and education providers – can obtain the information, support and guidance that is needed to inform decision making in a timely matter.

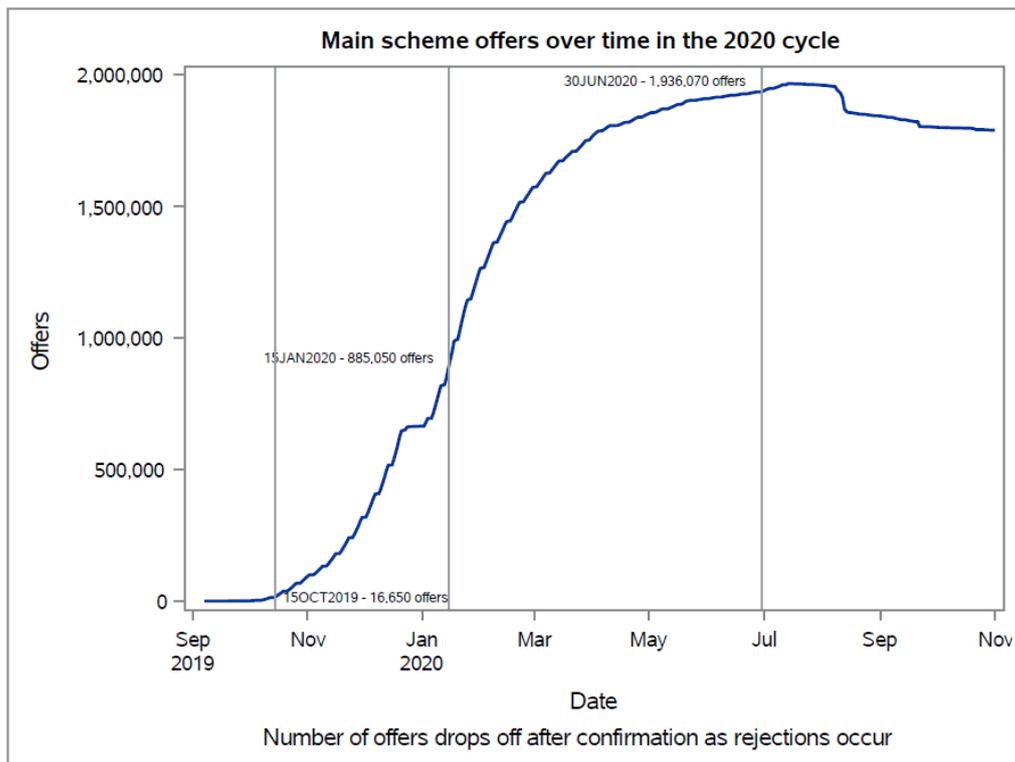
It is UCAS' view that the following issues should be considered in the assessment and awarding of qualifications for 2021-22:

1. Early clarity on standards to support next steps and offer making

From September 2021, schools will be providing predicted grades for HE applications for 2022 entry – and HE providers will be starting to make offers from this point. In order to inform these important decisions, it is essential that clarity on standards for general, vocational, technical and other qualifications, for the 2021-22 academic year, is given as early as possible to mitigate against confusion and inconsistency, and to ensure that teachers and advisers know at what standard to predict against.

The graph provided on page 2 of this document shows the volume of offers made by HE providers during the 2020 undergraduate admissions cycle. While the sharpest incline in offers does occur after the January equal consideration deadline, high volumes of offers are made prior to this deadline – over 868,000 offers were made between the October and January deadlines – heavily underlining the need for clarification about standards to be shared before the application cycle opens.

Offers made by HE providers during the 2020 undergraduate admissions cycle



Clarity on these standards will also help support offer making and offer confirmation strategies used by HE providers to help students progress successfully to the next stage of their education.

In the longer term, clarity on standards for future academic years is also needed, to provide as much certainty as possible for students, schools and providers as they plan for the future. For example, should standards and, the Department for Education and Ofqual will need to ensure this is clearly communicated well in advance of implementation, and those who are impacted by such changes are fully aware of these changes and any associated implications.

Through our resources, including our adviser portal, UCAS can assist with communications on standards to schools, teachers and careers advisers, to ensure they have the information needed to support student decision making.

2. Students' ability to articulate content coverage and access support with knowledge gaps

Given that the proposals are likely to lead to variance in the subject matter covered between schools and classes, it is important that students are able to articulate their experience in education and the knowledge they have gained on their course. This will ensure that any future pathway provider, whether that be for an undergraduate course or apprenticeship, is fully aware of this and can offer support if appropriate.

Additionally, it is common for universities and colleges to offer provision to support gaps in students' knowledge and skills, and that the first year of HE study is typically engineered to bring all students to the same level. Similarly, apprenticeship providers will offer similar support, heightening the need for them to understand the experience of individual students.

3. Support and guidance for students taking exams for the first time

For the majority of students taking general, vocational, technical and other qualifications in 2022, this will be the first time they will sit formal terminal examinations, with many having received teacher-determined or centre-assessed grades for their Level 2 qualifications. Consideration must therefore be given to how those students will be supported in the lead-up to – and duration of – the exam period, and what additional guidance will be given to schools.

The planned equality impact assessment will help provide reassurance that all angles have been considered, however, it is especially critical to consider the diversity between schools in how students will be supported, particularly disadvantaged students who may require extra help in managing revision, filling knowledge gaps, and refining exam technique. Students with SEND may also benefit from reassurance about access arrangements, with guidance for schools on mitigating any risks.

4. Promotion of arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs)

VTQs contribute significantly to widening access and participation and the government's broader levelling-up agenda, as outlined in our [response to the review of post-16 qualifications at Level 3 in England: Second Stage post-16 review](#).

Given the challenges during the past year in ensuring the arrangements for assessments and awarding of VTQs were well communicated and understood across the education sector, it is essential that more is done this year to promote the assessment and awarding arrangements for these qualifications once they have been finalised. The wide diversity in arrangements for these qualifications necessitates greater support to those responsible for delivering them – particularly in light of the greater proportion of widening participation students who take them.

To further support DfE and Ofqual in the promotion of these arrangements, we are keen to offer our communication channels to share key messaging and information. For students, our social media channels, email communications and website are available; for schools and advisers, we can offer messaging through the UCAS adviser portal and email communications.

More information

UCAS trusts this information is of use and is happy to expand on any of the points above. Our earlier responses to the review of post-16 qualifications also provide additional information on matters related to qualification reform and progression:

- [UCAS response to post-16 review \(Level 3 and below, June 2019\)](#)
- [UCAS response to post-16 review \(Level 3 – second stage\)](#)