

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
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19 August 2020

Dear Gavin

I am writing to formally request that the Department for Education commissions an independent review as a matter of urgency to rapidly understand what went wrong in the process for awarding grades in GCSEs, AS levels, A levels, and Vocational and Technical Qualifications, this summer.

As you know, we accepted and supported the principle of standardisation of centre-assessed grades, but the model that was applied appears to have created far too many anomalous results, such that standardisation has had to be abandoned and centre-assessed grades reverted to in many cases. That is the fairest possible solution in these circumstances, but has come only after many students were left distraught following last week's A-level results, chaos over university places, and with public confidence in the Department for Education and Ofqual badly damaged.

I believe the scale of these issues necessitates full transparency over why the standardisation model worked so poorly in practice, why this was not foreseen, and what processes were followed by Ofqual and the Department for Education to test that it was fit for purpose. This would be best served by commissioning an immediate independent review to rapidly investigate and ascertain exactly what has happened, and for the Department for Education to commit to publishing its findings and recommendations in full.

I note that the Minister for Education in Wales has already set out her intention for an independent review.

Most importantly, a review is needed in order to learn the lessons from what has happened this year, in case we are in a similar position next summer. As you know, we have voiced concern on several occasions that there appears to be no contingency planning for the exams which are planned in 2021 in the event that they are widely disrupted because of coronavirus. This seems to us to be a very serious omission in light of the unpredictable nature of the virus and the possibility of infection spikes before and during next summer's exams. The last thing we want is to have another exercise in which grades have to be assessed, but if such a situation was to arise, we must understand what is the best approach, and not make the same mistakes which have been made this year.

I am sure you will understand the importance to our members of the issues I have raised in this letter, and I am therefore going to share this letter with them, and your response. It will also be available on our website. I say this only so that you are fully aware of how it will be used.

As you know, ASCL has endeavoured to be very supportive of the process followed this summer, and we provided a great deal of support and guidance to our members, who worked very hard to provide students with fair and accurate grades in line with Ofqual guidance. They, and we, feel shattered by the events which have unfolded, both personally and on behalf of the young people who have had such an appalling experience.

Please do let me know if you would like to discuss any matters raised in this letter. I look forward to your reply.

Yours,
Geoff Barton

Geoff Barton | General Secretary

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