

UK ENIC Special Report

The Effects of COVID-19 on International Secondary Assessment

Summer 2021 Update

2nd September 2021

Foreword

Since March 2020, UK ENIC has been tracking the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education globally. At the peak, educational institutions were closed in 169 countries, affecting 84% of total enrolled learners worldwide¹. Throughout 2020, national examinations for over 30 upper secondary qualifications were cancelled, and assessments for many others postponed or adapted. This year, school closures have continued to affect learners across the world as countries have responded to increases in cases and the emergence of new variants of the virus. National school closures were in place in 40 countries during the first six months of the year. In some cases, the ongoing disruption has led to changes to school examinations and assessment for a second time.

We continue to provide a summary of ongoing changes to education delivery and announcements regarding national examinations on our blog, [Charting the impact of COVID-19 on UK admissions and recruitment](#). It provides updates for over 90 countries and remains an essential resource for those working in international education.

This report brings together the information compiled for the blog on examinations which were due to be held between March and June 2021, but were affected by the pandemic. It provides a useful overview of the changes and more in-depth information on the alternative modes of assessment put in place where examinations were cancelled.

By publishing this update, UK ENIC aims to support both the work of those involved in international student recruitment and admissions, and fair recognition of qualifications awarded during this period of disrupted learning.

Paul Norris
Head of UK ENIC

¹ UNESCO, 2020
Copyright © 2021 UK ENIC

Contents

Foreword.....	2
1. Introduction.....	4
2. Summary of secondary assessment changes for 2021	7
3. Spotlight on selected countries and qualifications	11
France - <i>Baccalauréat</i>	11
India - Higher Secondary Certificate / Standard 12	13
Ireland - Leaving Certificate	18
Italy - <i>Esame di Stato</i>	20
United Kingdom - A levels, AS levels and GCSEs.....	22
United Kingdom - Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers and National 5	25
United Kingdom - other qualifications.....	27
International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs	28
International Baccalaureate	29
4. Looking ahead	31

1. Introduction

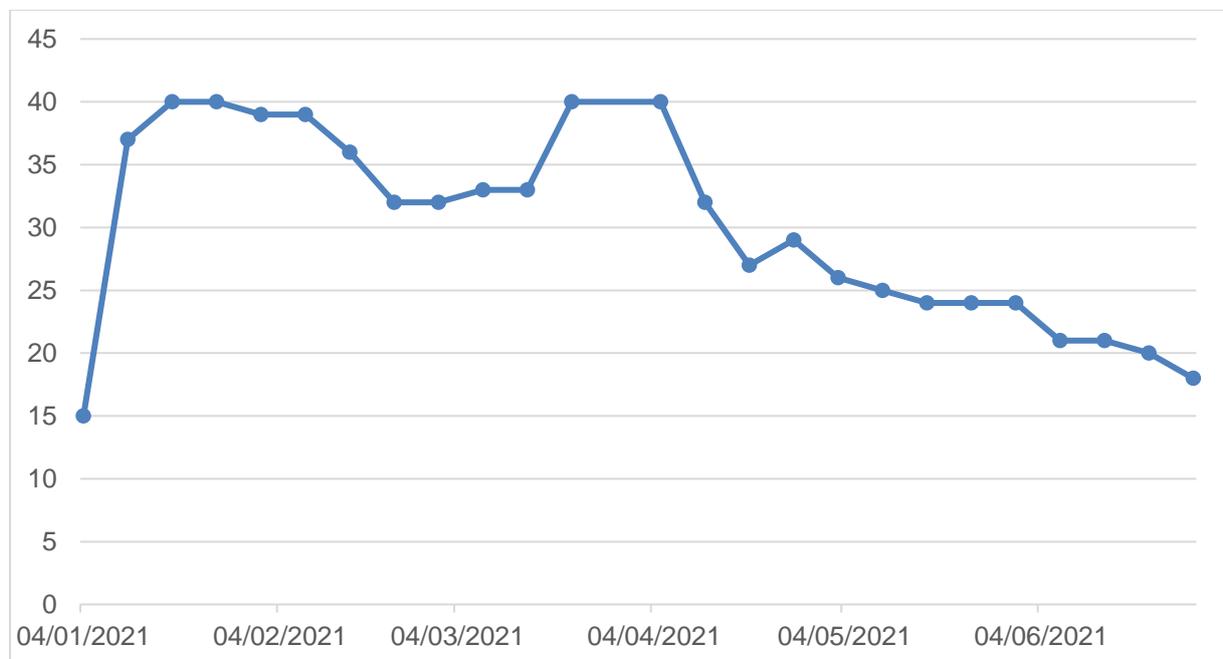
Since schools were first closed in Hubei province in China in January 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on education at all levels across the world. At the peak of the disruption in 2020, schools were closed on a national level in the majority of countries.

Over one year later, education in most countries has not yet returned to the situation before the pandemic. Many schools and universities continue to offer online or blended learning; additional hygiene measures, regular testing, limited class sizes, reduced face-to-face teaching hours and localised school closures remain features of everyday life in educational institutions globally. Students have experienced a second academic year of disruption and uncertainty.

Disrupted learning

In the first six months of 2021, the number of countries with schools closed on a national level was lower than in 2020. In response to concerns about learning loss and the wider impact of school closures, many countries began to adopt a more localised approach towards the end of 2020. Schools were only closed in areas where there were particularly high numbers of cases, rather than nationwide. Despite this, there were national closures in place in up to 40 countries in the first few months of the year.

Figure 1: Number of countries with national closures January – June 2021



Source: [UNESCO Global monitoring of school closures](#)

Changes to exams and assessment

As might be expected, there have been fewer cancellations and postponements to national exams in 2021 than in 2020. Last year, exams scheduled between April and June were particularly badly affected, as many countries introduced national lockdowns and school closures in March 2020, only a short time before the exams were due to take place. This year, although disruption has continued, governments and awarding bodies had more time to put procedures, processes and contingency plans in place. Since the start of the pandemic, additional hygiene measures, vaccination programmes and testing have enabled many activities to go ahead that were not possible in the early months of the response in 2020. A combination of these factors meant that more exams went ahead this year.

However, students sitting exams in 2021 experienced disruption and learning loss over an extended period of time. According to [UNESCO data](#), by July 2021, there were six countries where schools had been closed on a national level for over 50 weeks in total: Panama, Mexico, Myanmar, Kuwait, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Students in many other countries had also experienced prolonged disruption to their studies over the period of more than a year.

Many countries made some changes to the syllabus or scope of the exams to mitigate for this so students would not be disadvantaged. For example, the Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (FBISE) in Pakistan reduced the syllabus for the Higher Secondary Certificate and the Ministry of Education in Luxembourg reduced the content covered in final exams by 15%. Assessment for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) was streamlined. For some subjects, school-based assessment was cancelled, and the duration and number of questions required for some exams was reduced.

In some cases, the timing of exams was changed to allow for more preparation time. HKDSE exams were pushed back by around a month; the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE) was delayed until August. An increase in the infection rate led to A level exams in Sri Lanka being postponed from August until October.

In a small number of countries, the decision was taken to cancel exams and use an alternative means of assessment. Among these countries were the UK and India. Other countries, such as France and Italy, opted to reduce the number of exams. In France, some subjects were assessed through continuous assessment rather than a final written exam. In Italy, students were only required to take an oral exam; all written exams were cancelled for a second year.

Impact of changes to assessment

Changing the way a qualification is assessed can affect students' results and grading. For example, replacing exams with continuous or teacher assessment typically results in higher grades for students. The differences between how grades were determined during the pandemic and in previous years have resulted in significant changes to grade distributions for some qualifications, meaning that it is difficult to make meaningful comparisons about student attainment.

In 2020, where external examinations were cancelled and replaced by teacher assessment, or final grades were based solely on internal assessment, pass rates were higher and a larger proportion of students achieved top grades compared to previous years. This outcome was seen for a number of qualifications, for which final exams were cancelled, including UK A levels, Scottish Highers, the Irish Leaving Certificate and the French *Baccalauréat*. More top grades were also awarded for the Italian *Esame di Stato*, where increased weighting was given continuous assessment, in place of final written exams. Assessment for all these qualifications was adapted for a second time this year, with exams cancelled or reduced. With the exception of the Leaving Certificate, 2021 results have now been released and show a continuation of the trends which emerged last year. Pass rates remained higher than before the pandemic and were generally similar to 2020. The proportion of top grades awarded were also in line with 2020, and in some cases, increased further.

Similarly, results for many national and state boards in India indicate that the pass rate for Standard 12 has increased this year compared to previous years. The majority of Standard 12 exams were cancelled in July, due to an increase in infections following the emergence of the delta variant. Grades were based on a combination of teacher assessment and past exam performance.

Tracking the latest developments

Since early 2020, UK ENIC has been tracking school closures and monitoring the impact on exams and assessment on our blog: [Charting the impact of COVID-19 on UK admissions and recruitment](#).

In May 2020, we released a briefing paper, [The Effects of COVID-19 on International Secondary Assessment](#), which looked at global approaches to assessment at upper secondary level during the early months of the response to the pandemic.

Early in 2021, we published [COVID-19: Guide to International Secondary Assessment in 2020](#), which provided an overview of assessment for over 120 qualifications worldwide, analysis of the different approaches adopted globally, and examines the effects on student performance and grading.

This report provides an update to these resources, focussing on the ongoing disruption to assessment in the 2021 summer exam season.

[Section 2](#) provides an overview of qualifications for which there were changes to assessment for 2021, including exam cancellations and postponements.

[Section 3](#) examines some of the arrangements for some of these qualifications in more detail, focussing on those for which exams were cancelled, or there were other significant changes to the format of assessment.

Section 4 looks ahead to the potential considerations and challenges for assessment at secondary level going forward.

2. Summary of secondary assessment changes for 2021

Key:



Exams were postponed or delayed*



The format of the exams was adapted



Exams were cancelled



Other

*compared to dates originally announced, or compared to the usual timetable

Country	Examination	Awarding body	Status	Summary of changes for 2021
Bangladesh	Higher School Certificate	Boards of intermediate and secondary education		Exams have been postponed until November / December.
Denmark	<i>Bevis for Højere Forberedelseksamen</i> (Higher Preparatory Examination Certificate)	Schools		The number of exams was reduced.
France	<i>Baccalauréat general / technologique / professionnel</i>	<i>Ministère de l'Éducation nationale</i>		Students only took an oral exam and a written exam in philosophy; other exams were cancelled.
Gambia	West African Senior School Certificate Examination	West African Examinations Council (WAEC)		Exams have been postponed until August / September.

Ghana	West African Senior School Certificate Examination	West African Examinations Council (WAEC)		Exams have been postponed until August / September.
Hong Kong	Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)	Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA)		Assessment was streamlined. Exams were held in April.
India	All India Senior School Certificate Examination / Delhi Senior School Certificate Examination	Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)		Exams were cancelled.
	Indian School Certificate	Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)		Exams were cancelled.
	Senior Secondary School Examination	National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS)		Exams were cancelled.
	Higher Secondary Certificate / Standard 12	State boards		Most boards cancelled exams.
Ireland	Leaving Certificate	State Examinations Commission		Exams went ahead but students could choose whether to sit them or receive grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).
Italy	Esame di Stato	<i>Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca</i>		Written exams were cancelled. Grades are based on oral exam and performance across the three years of upper secondary.
Latvia	<i>Atestāts par vispārējo vidējo izglītību</i> (Certificate of General Secondary Education)	<i>Valsts Izglītības Saturs Centrs</i> (National Centre for Education)		The format of the exams was adapted so there was no mandatory fourth exam.
Liberia	West African Senior School Certificate Examination	West African Examinations Council (WAEC)		Exams have been postponed until August / September.
Luxembourg	<i>Diplôme de fin d'études secondaires</i>	<i>Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Formation professionnelle</i>		Content was reduced by 15%.

Nepal	School Leaving Certificate Examination	National Examinations Board		Exams have been postponed until further notice.
Nigeria	West African Senior School Certificate Examination	West African Examinations Council (WAEC)		Exams have been postponed until August / September.
North Macedonia	Диплома за положен завршен испит (Secondary School Leaving Diploma)	National Examinations Centre		The format of the exams was adapted so there were two external exams, two internal exams and a project task.
Norway	<i>Vitnemål for videregående opplæring</i> (Leaving Certificate from Upper Secondary School)	<i>Utdanningsdirektoratet</i> (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training)		Written exams were cancelled.
Pakistan	Intermediate / Higher Secondary School Certificate	Boards of intermediate and secondary education	 	Exams were postponed until July and the syllabus was reduced.
Poland	<i>Świadectwo Dojrzałości</i> (Certificate of Maturity)	Central Examination Board / regional examination boards		Students sat written exams only; oral exams were cancelled.
Portugal	<i>Diploma Nível Secundário de Educação / Certificado Nível Secundário de Educação</i>	<i>Ministério da Educação</i>		Exams were only taken by those intending to go on to higher education.
Sierra Leone	West African Senior School Certificate Examination	West African Examinations Council (WAEC)		Exams have been postponed until August / September.
Slovakia	<i>Vysvedčenie o maturitnej skúške</i> (Secondary School Leaving Certificate)	<i>Národný ústav certifikovaných meraní vzdelávania (NÚCEM)</i> (National Institute for Certified Educational Assessments)		External exams were cancelled.

Sri Lanka	Sri Lankan General Certificate of Education (Advanced level)	Department of Examinations		Exams have been postponed from August until October.
United Kingdom	General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels)	AQA; Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA): OCR; Pearson Edexcel; Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC)		Exams were cancelled. Results will be based on grades submitted to exam boards by teachers.
	Highers / Advanced Highers	Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)		Exams were cancelled. An alternative certification model has been put in place, with results based on grades submitted by schools.
International	International Baccalaureate	International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO)		Two assessment routes (an examination route and a non-examination route) were offered, depending on whether schools in different countries were able to administer exams safely.
International	International General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels)	Cambridge Assessment International Education		Exams went ahead where possible. School-assessed grades were used in countries / regions where government directives meant that exams could not take place.
International	International General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels)	Oxford International AQA Examinations		Exams were cancelled and students were awarded teacher-assessed grades.
International	International General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Levels (A levels)	Pearson		Exams were cancelled and students were awarded teacher-assessed grades.

3. Spotlight on selected countries and qualifications

This section focusses in on the assessment changes in a few select countries, where the examinations have been cancelled or significantly adapted from their typical format and alternative approaches to assessment and calculating grades were used.

France - *Baccalauréat*

The *Bac* in brief

Entry to higher education in France is typically based on the *Diplôme du baccalauréat*, a three-year upper secondary qualification finishing after 12 years of schooling.

The academic stream leads to the title of the *Diplôme du baccalauréat général*. An international option (the *Option internationale du baccalauréat*) is also available, which is mostly followed by students with foreign language proficiency. They will take some subjects through the medium of French, and others through a foreign language. Technical (*Diplôme du baccalauréat technologique*) and professional (*Diplôme du baccalauréat professionnel*) streams of the *Baccalauréat* are also available.

All students achieving a mark of 10/20 in the *Baccalauréat* are able to access university studies.

What was changed for 2021?

Assessment for the *Baccalauréat* changed this year as part of planned reforms, but was also disrupted by the continued impact of the pandemic. As part of the planned changes, final grades are based on both final exams (60%) and continuous assessment (40%) and students sit fewer exams than in the past.

In a normal year under the new system, students in *terminale* (final year) will sit written exams in philosophy and their two chosen subjects of specialisation and take a final oral exam. Students in *première* (penultimate year) sit an exam in French.

This year, specialisation subjects were assessed through continuous assessment, after the exams, which were originally scheduled to take place in March, were cancelled. The final philosophy exam and oral exam for students in *terminale* went ahead in June. The French exam for students in *première* was also held in June.

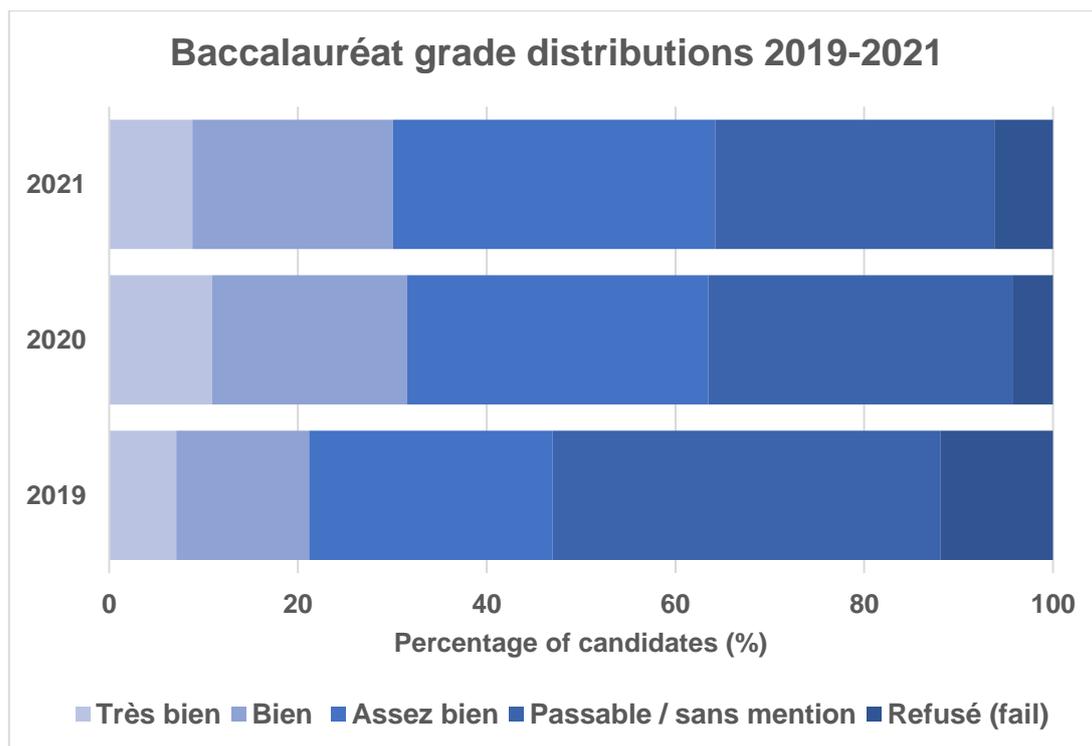
Is that the same as in 2020?

This is different to last year. In 2020, all exams were cancelled. Grades were based on continuous assessment throughout the 2019-2020 academic year.

Have the changes affected results?

The overall pass rate in 2021 was 93.8%. This is slightly lower than the 95.7% of candidates who passed in 2020. However, it is higher than all other years prior to that.

64.2% of students achieved a *mention*, compared to 63.5% in 2020 and 47% in 2019.



Source: [Direction de l'évaluation, de la prospective et de la performance \(DEPP\)](#)

India - Higher Secondary Certificate / Standard 12

Standard 12 in brief

In India, there are two principal exit qualifications in school, one taken on completion of 10 years of schooling (Standard 10), and another on completion of 12 years (Standard 12). Entry to higher education in India is based on the Standard 12.

The titles vary according to the awarding body, which could be a state education board or one of three national boards:

- The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)
- The Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)
- The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS).

Students are usually examined in five or six subjects. Grading systems differ among boards, so university admission requirements are usually based on the percentage scores achieved in the best five subjects.

What was changed for 2021?

Students usually sit internal exams in Grade 11 and external exams in Grade 12. In 2021, the majority of exam boards cancelled external exams due to the pandemic.

Which boards cancelled exams?

Board	Status	Details
Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)		Exams cancelled.
Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)		Exams cancelled.
National Board of Open Schooling (NIOS)		Exams cancelled.
Board of Intermediate Education Andhra Pradesh		Exams cancelled.
Assam Higher Secondary Education Council		Exams cancelled.
Bihar School Examination Board		Exams were completed in February.
Chhattisgarh Board of Secondary Education		Students sat exams in an adapted format at home in June.

Goa Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education		Exams cancelled.
Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board		Exams cancelled.
Board of School Education Haryana		Exams cancelled.
Jharkhand Academic Council		Exams cancelled.
Government of Karnataka Department of Pre-University Education		Exams cancelled.
Government of Kerala Board of Higher Secondary Examinations		Exams were held in April.
Board of Secondary Education, Madhya Pradesh		Exams cancelled.
Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education		Exams cancelled.
Council of Higher Secondary Education, Odisha		Exams cancelled.
Punjab School Education Board		Exams cancelled.
Board of Secondary Education, Rajasthan		Exams cancelled.
State Board of School Examinations, Tamil Nadu		Exams cancelled.
Telangana State Board of Intermediate Education: Hyderabad		Exams cancelled.
Board of High School and Intermediate Education, Uttar Pradesh		Exams cancelled.
Board of School Education Uttarakhand		Exams cancelled.
West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education		Exams cancelled.

How were grades awarded without exams?

A number of boards have released details of how grades were determined this year. Students are assessed in Class 11 by schools and sit a number of internal tests and exams throughout the academic year in Class 11 and Class 12. Most boards opted to use these, along with the results of the external exams taken in Class 10, as a basis for awarding

grades. In some cases, the overall performance of the school in previous years was also taken into account.

Further details of the approaches taken by specific boards can be found below.

Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)

Grades are based on theory (assessed through external exams) and practical / internal assessment (assessed by schools), in different weightings, depending on the subject.

This year, external exams were cancelled due to Covid-19. Grades for the theory component were awarded based on the following three components:

Unit tests / mid-terms / pre-board exams conducted by schools during Class 12	40%
Class 11 final written exam (taken in 2020)	30%
Marks from the three main subjects in which the student performed best in the Class 10 written exams (taken in 2019)	30%

Source: [CBSE Tabulation Policy for Class XII \(June 2021\)](#)

Marks awarded for practical work, projects and internal assessments, which usually form part of the overall grade, were submitted by schools and also contributed towards final grades this year. Where these assessments were not completed by students in-person while schools were open, online assessments were permitted.

The marks awarded for the Class 12 and Class 11 components were moderated by schools to ensure that they were in line with the school's performance in previous years.

Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE)

As external written exams were cancelled, grades were based on the following components:

- Marks obtained in the Class 10 examination
- Marks obtained for practical / project work in Class 12
- Performance in school exams in Class 11 and Class 12.

The school's previous performance in CISCE exams was also used in grade calculations to ensure results were in line with previous years. Full details of the algorithm used are provided in the [CISCE Scheme for the ISCE \(Class X\) and ISC \(Class XII\) Year 2021 Examinations](#).

Gujarat

The Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board also announced that grades would be based performance in Class 10 exams (50%) and internal school exams and test taken and Class 11 (25%) and Class 12 (25%).

Karnataka

The Department of Pre-University Education considered performance in the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) taken in Class 10 and the Pre-University Certificate I exams taken in Class 11.

Punjab

The Punjab School Education Board followed the same approach as CBSE.

West Bengal

Class 12 results were based on the following:

Results of best 4 subjects in Class 10 exams	40%
Class 11 exam results + Class 12 assessments and practical exam results	60%

How did exams go ahead in Bihar, Chhattisgarh and Kerala?

Exams in Bihar were held in February, in the usual format, with social distancing measures in place. The state government in Kerala allowed exams to go ahead in April, after they were postponed from the original dates in March.

The Chhattisgarh Board of Secondary Education was the only board which opted to change the format of the exams to enable to students to sit them at home. Students collected exam papers and then had five days to complete them and return them in-person. The papers were open-book format.

How does this compare to last year?

In 2020, the three national boards cancelled exams, but many state boards were able to proceed as planned or with short delays. Some boards cancelled exams for some subjects after holding exams in others, as the exam sessions in some states were in progress when India introduced a national lockdown in March 2020.

Have the changes affected results?

Most boards released results at the end of July.

Pass rates for boards which cancelled exams and used alternative means of assessment were higher than previous years.

The table below shows the overall pass rates for a number of boards which cancelled exams in 2021:

Board	Pass rate in 2021	Pass rate in 2020
CBSE	99.37%	88.78%*
CISCE	99.7%	96.8%*
Karnataka	100%	69.2%
Maharashtra	99.63%	90.66%
Punjab	96.48%	90.98%
West Bengal	97.69%	90.13%

*exams were also cancelled in 2020

Pass rates were also higher than 2020 for two of the boards which went ahead with exams in 2021. The open-book exams held in Chhattisgarh had a higher pass rate than previous years.

Board	Pass rate in 2021	Pass rate in 2020
Kerala	87.94%	85.13%
Bihar	78.04%	80.44%
Chhattisgarh	97.43%	70.69%

Ireland - Leaving Certificate

The Leaving Cert in brief

The Leaving Certificate grants access to higher education in Ireland. Subjects are offered at Higher and Ordinary level, with a Foundation level also available in Irish and mathematics. There are three streams: Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme.

The Leaving Certificate is usually assessed through final written examinations, with additional oral and practical examinations in some subjects. Students are required to sit a minimum of five subjects, though most take six or seven. Examinations are administered by the State Examinations Commission (SEC).

What was changed for 2021?

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 State Examinations Commission (SEC). Students could also opt to both take the exam and receive an accredited grade; the higher grade will be recorded in the Leaving Certificate results. Oral and coursework components count towards final grades where exams were taken, but do not count towards accredited grades.

How are accredited grades calculated?

Accredited grades are based on:

- An estimated percentage mark for a student's expected performance in the exam, provided by the school
- National data on students' performance in previous exams².

Accredited grades are subject to an alignment process within individual schools and national standardisation.

How does this compare to last year?

In 2020, all exams for the Leaving Certificate were cancelled. Students were awarded calculated grades based on their expected performance, which were subject to a national standardisation process.

How many students opted to take the exams?

In most subjects, 65-80% of students entered for the exams³. However, attendance may have been lower in some cases. Accredited grades are calculated for all students, as long as sufficient evidence is available.

² [A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021](#)

³ <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/exams/leaving-cert-2021-attendance-unpredictable-with-covid-options-but-many-students-taking-traditional-route-40518095.html>

When will results be available?

Results will be released on 3rd September 2021.

Italy - Esame di Stato

The Esame di Stato in brief

The Esame di Stato is taken by students at the age of 19, after a total of 13 years of education and is required for admission to university in Italy. Assessment consists of three written examinations (*prove scritte*) and one oral examination (*colloquio*).

What was changed for 2021?

In 2021, the written exams were cancelled. Students were only required to take an oral exam. The oral exam was multidisciplinary and covered the subjects studied in the final year. Students' performance throughout upper secondary education also contributed to their final grade.

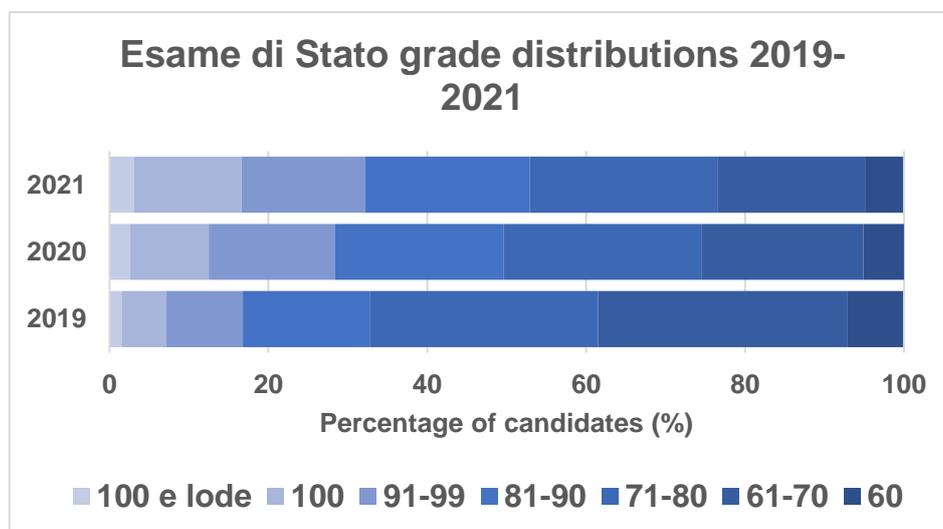
Overall grades are expressed out of a maximum of 100, broken down as follows:

Component	Points		
	2021	2020	Other years
Written exams	-	-	45
Oral exam	40	40	35
Internal school assessment	60	60	20
Total	100	100	100

The same approach was adopted in 2020.

How were results affected?

Results were released in July. The overall pass rate was 99.8%, which is very similar to previous years.



Source: [Ministero dell'Istruzione](#)

The percentage of students achieving the highest grades was higher than in 2020; 52.9% achieved a grade of 80 or higher compared to 48.9% last year. This compares to 32.8% in 2019.

United Kingdom - A levels, AS levels and GCSEs

A levels and AS levels in brief

A levels and AS levels are taken by students in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. They are offered by a number of different examination boards and overseen by three different regulators: The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) (England); the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) (NI); and Qualifications Wales.

AS level courses last one year and A level courses are taken over two years. AS Levels contribute towards the full A Level for qualifications in Wales and Northern Ireland, but not in England. In England, AS levels exist as a one-year stand-alone award.

Ofqual-regulated A levels are all linear, where exams are taken at the end of the course, whereas qualifications regulated by Qualifications Wales and CCEA may be linear or modular.

Students typically take three subjects at A level.

GCSEs in brief

GCSE subjects are offered by different examination boards and are also regulated by Ofqual, CCEA and Qualifications Wales.

All students sit GCSE examinations in English, mathematics and science. Welsh is also compulsory in Wales. A wide range of other subjects are also offered; students typically take 8 to 10 subjects.

Ofqual-regulated GCSEs are linear, with all exams at the end of the course. GCSEs offered and regulated in Northern Ireland and Wales may be linear or modular.

GCSEs regulated by Ofqual are graded 9-1, whilst those regulated by Qualifications Wales and CCEA are graded A*-G.

What was changed for 2021?

All exams for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs were cancelled in 2021. Results were based on grades submitted to exam boards by teachers. These grades drew upon a range of evidence, such as non-exam assessment, work completed in class, class tests and mock exams, and were subject to quality assurance processes.

Detailed guidance was issued by the three regulatory bodies and by the [Joint Council for Qualifications \(JCQ\)](#). Examination boards have also published details of their processes for awarding qualifications.

How does this compare to 2020?

In 2020, schools and colleges were asked to provide centre assessment grades (CAGs) for each subject. This grade was intended to reflect the grade that the student would most likely have achieved if they had sat the exams. Schools and colleges were also asked to submit the rank order of students within each grade for each subject, which was used for statistical standardisation and not shared with students.

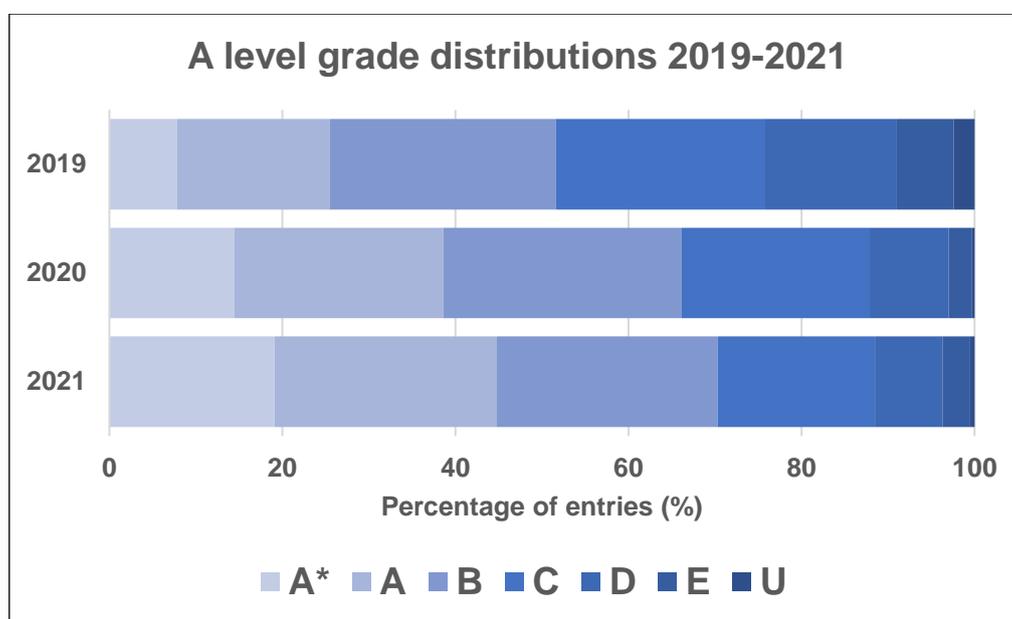
Initially, students were issued the results calculated following the standardisation process. However, after the algorithm used for the original standardisation process was judged to be unfair, students were awarded the CAGs submitted by their schools if they were higher than their standardised grades.

In 2021, the process is different. Students will be awarded grades based on teacher judgement, which draw upon a range of evidence. Ranking of students is not required and an algorithm will not be used to standardise results nationally.

How has this affected results?

AS and A level results were released on 10th August 2021 and GCSE results on 12th August 2021.

For A levels, there was a significant increase in the proportion of entries awarded the top grades. 44.3% of entries received an A* or A grade, compared to 38.1% in 2020 and 25.1% in 2019. There was also a small increase in the percentage of entries awarded grades A*-C from 75.5% in 2019 and 87.5% in 2020 to 88.2% this year.



Source: [Joint Council for Qualifications \(JCQ\)](#)

AS level results saw a similar trend of an increase in top grades: 35.9% of entries were awarded an A grade this year, compared to 30.6% in 2020 and 21.5% in 2019.

Numbers of AS level entries in England have fallen significantly since AS levels were decoupled from A levels in 2015 and became a standalone qualification. The AS level contributes towards the final A level grade in Northern Ireland and Wales.

For GCSEs, there was a smaller increase in the percentage of top grades awarded on 2021 compared to 2020: there was an increase of 2.7 percentage points in entries awarded a grade of 7 / A or above to 28.9%. The proportion of entries awarded a 4 / C or above was similar to last year.

United Kingdom - Scottish Highers and Advanced Highers and National 5

Highers and Advanced Highers in brief

In Scotland, students looking to access higher education take Highers and Advanced Highers, awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Students can also opt to take the Scottish Baccalaureate, which is a group qualification made up of one Higher, two Advanced Highers and an interdisciplinary project.

Highers and Advanced Highers are graded A-D. Final grades are based on final examinations and externally marked coursework.

National 5 in brief

Students usually sit either the National 5 in Secondary 3 or 4, before taking Highers and / or Advanced Highers in Secondary 5 or 6. A wide range of subjects are offered and there is no fixed number that students should take.

National 5 subjects are graded A-D. Final grades are based on final examinations and externally marked coursework.

What was changed for 2021?

Exams for Highers, Advanced Highers and National 5 were cancelled. The SQA developed an [alternative certification model](#) to replace exam assessment in 2021. Under this model, students will receive teacher-assessed grades. These grades will be based on students' performance in mock exams and coursework.

How does this compare to 2020?

In 2020, teachers and lecturers submitted estimated grades to SQA, based on student performance throughout the course. Schools and colleges also submitted an estimated band within the grade (upper, middle or lower) and rank order for students within each grade band for each subject. These grades were then moderated by SQA.

After concerns were expressed about the grades awarded, students whose results were downgraded as a result of the SQA moderation process were re-issued with the grades submitted by their teachers.

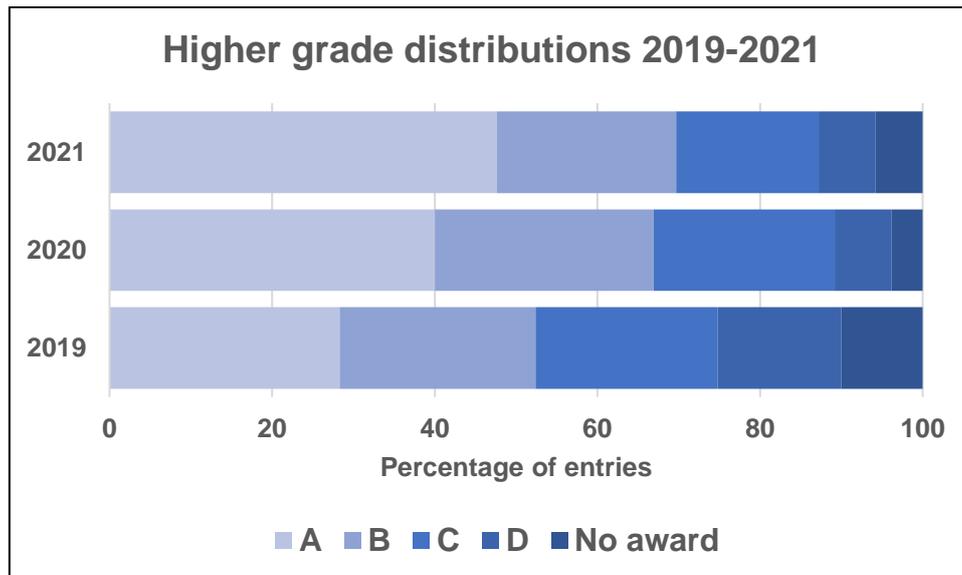
In 2021, a quality assurance process was used in place of moderation by SQA. Teacher grades must be based on at least four different pieces of work for each student, ideally completed under exam conditions. Teachers within the same school checked colleagues'

work and local authorities also sampled work. Some schools were checked by SQA as a final stage in the quality assurance process.

How has this affected results?

Results were released on 10th August 2021.

87.3% of entries for Highers were awarded grades A to C, compared to 89.3% in 2020 and 74.8% in 2019. There was an increase in the proportion of entries awarded the top grade; 47.6% were awarded an A grade this year, compared to 40% in 2020 and 28.3% in 2019.



Source: [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#)

A similar pattern emerged in the results for Advanced Highers. The percentage of entries awarded grades A-C was slightly down compared to 2020 but higher than previous years. The proportion of A grades rose to 51%.

For National 5, the proportion of top grades also increased compared to previous years (2021: 46.7%; 2020: 42.3%; 2019: 35.1%). Mirroring the trends seen at Higher and Advanced Higher level, the percentage of entries awarded grades A-C (85.8%) was slightly lower than in 2020, but higher than previous years.

United Kingdom - other qualifications

Which other qualifications have been affected?

There are a wide range of other qualifications studied by learners across the UK, many of which can be used for progression onto higher education. Ofqual set out a [contingency regulatory framework](#) which covers the awarding of vocational, technical and other general qualifications in 2021.

There have been changes to the assessment for many of these qualifications as a result of the pandemic.

Information on the awarding of specific qualifications can be found in the [Summer Qualification Explainer Tool](#) compiled by Ofqual.

Other general qualifications

Exams were cancelled for qualifications that were most similar to GCSEs and A levels and provide progression to further or higher education. These include:

- International Baccalaureate (see the [International Baccalaureate section](#) for further details)
- Cambridge Pre-U
- Advanced Extension Awards (AEA)
- Extended Project Qualifications (EPQ).

BTEC qualifications

Learners completing BTEC qualifications in 2021 receive a Teacher Assessed Grade (TAG). This grade is submitted by schools and colleges, based on a range of evidence of students' performance.

When will results be available?

Results for qualifications linked to progression to higher education were released on the same date or before A level and GCSE results. Results for other qualifications may be issued at other times.

International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs

International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs in brief

International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs are offered by Cambridge Assessment International Education, Oxford International AQA Examinations and Pearson for the international market. These qualifications are not regulated by Ofqual.

International AS levels follow a similar structure to those offered in Northern Ireland and Wales; the AS level contributes towards the full A level.

What was changed for 2021?

Oxford International AQA Examinations and Pearson cancelled all exams for International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs in summer 2021. Students were awarded teacher-assessed grades. The approach adopted was based on and very similar to the process for regulated A level and GCSE qualifications within the UK.

Cambridge Assessment International Education went ahead with exams, apart from in countries and regions where government directives meant that it was possible to hold exams. In these instances, students were awarded school-assessed grades. Countries where exams were cancelled include India, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

How does this compare to 2020?

All exams for International A levels, AS levels and GCSEs were cancelled in 2020. The process for awarding grades last year was very similar to the approach adopted in England.

When were results released?

Results for A levels and AS levels were released on 10th August and results for GCSEs on 12th August; the same days as the counterpart qualifications taken by students in the UK.

International Baccalaureate

The IB in brief

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme is a two-year programme which is widely accepted for admission to higher education. Students study subjects from across six subject groups; three or four at higher level and the rest at standard level. They must also complete theory of knowledge (TOK); creativity, activity, service (CAS); and an extended essay. Subjects are assessed through internal and external assessment.

Students receive a grade on a scale of 7-1 (with 7 as the highest) for each course. The final grade for the IB Diploma combines the grades awarded for each course. Up to three additional points are awarded each for the extended essay and TOK. A minimum of 24 points is required for a student to be awarded the Diploma. CAS does not contribute towards the final grade, but is a requirement for the award of the Diploma.

What was changed for 2021?

A dual assessment route was offered. Written exams were held where they could be conducted safely; an alternative route based on internal school assessment and coursework was offered where it is not possible to hold exams.

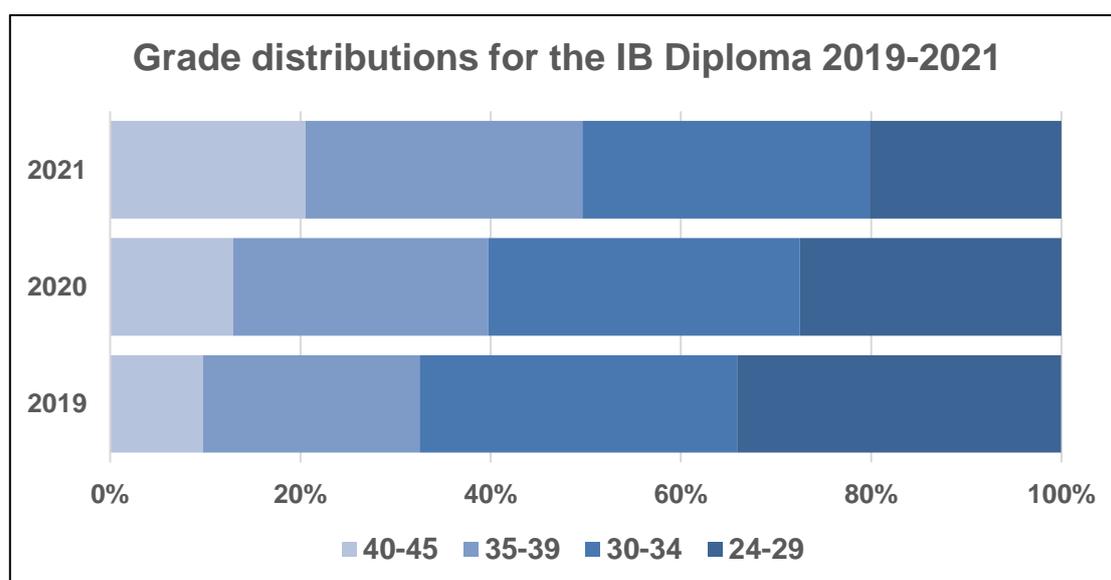
How does this compare to 2020?

In May 2020, all exams were cancelled. The dual assessment approach was adopted for the November 2020 exam session.

How has this affected results?

Results were released on 6th July 2021.

The overall pass rate was 88.93%, compared to 85.16% in 2020 and 77.83% in 2019.



Source: [IB Diploma Programme Statistical Bulletins](#)

The proportion of students awarded top grades was higher than previous years. The percentage of students awarded 40 points or higher increased to 20.53%, compared to 12.92% in 2020 and 9.77% in 2019.

4. Looking ahead

It is likely that in 2022 it will be possible for exams to be held in the vast majority of countries. However, there are still challenges and many different factors for governments and awarding bodies to consider when determining how to assess students next year and beyond.

Taking account of learning loss

The 2022 cohort have experienced considerable disruption to their studies over two academic years, and it is possible that in some cases this will continue into their final year. To mitigate for this, it is likely that assessment will be adapted for some qualifications for another year, for example, through reductions to the syllabus or changes to the format of some exams. A key consideration for exam boards will be ensuring fairness to all candidates.

The Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA) has announced that assessment for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) will be streamlined in 2022⁴, as face-to-face classes have been suspended for an extended period of time. Written exams for a number of subjects will have their duration reduced and / or include a number of optional questions in place of compulsory questions. Some school-based assessment components and practical exams have also been cancelled or streamlined.

The Scottish Government and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) have confirmed that exams will be held in 2022 if it is safe to do so, but that course content has been reduced.

Grading and grade distributions

In countries where exams have been cancelled or increased weighting has been given to teacher assessment, such as France, India, Italy and the UK, the distribution of grades awarded has been quite different to prior to the pandemic. Pass rates have increased, and higher grades have been awarded. This has affected higher education admissions in a number of countries, where higher numbers of students have been eligible for entry onto degree courses, leading to extra places being created. Returning to the previous assessment and grading practices is likely to lead to lower pass rates and lower grades overall compared to 2020 and 2021. A key consideration for government and exam boards will be ensuring both fairness across different cohorts of students and ongoing validity of results.

⁴ https://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/Media/PR/PR_2022DSE_public_exam_streamlining_eng.pdf
Copyright © 2021 UK ENIC

GET IN TOUCH

www.enic.org.uk

feedback@enic.org.uk

