

Summer exams to be voluntary sparking fears over repeat of last year's chaos

Teachers will decide whether students sit traditional papers in test conditions

By **Camilla Turner**, EDUCATION EDITOR and **Harry Yorke**, WHITEHALL EDITOR
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324



End of year exams **will be voluntary**, the Department for Education (DfE) will announce on Thursday, amid warnings of another summer of chaos and record **grade inflation**.

Exam boards will prepare a series of **test papers** for every subject, but teachers will be allowed to choose whether or not to use them to inform their **predicted grades**.

If teachers decide to use the papers, students will not need to take them under exam conditions. Teachers will also have discretion over whether they are **taken at home or at school**.

The Telegraph has learned that Sir Jon Coles, a former director general at the (DfE), who was on the Ofqual committee advising on exams, has resigned and is now publicly criticising the Government.

He said the plans, which will see pupils tested under different conditions across the country, "risk an outcome... much worse than last year".

Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, who had previously announced that exams **would be cancelled for the second year in a row** because of the Covid crisis, will unveil the arrangements for this year's grading system in the Commons on Thursday.



He had been under pressure from the exam watchdog Ofqual to introduce standardised test papers rather than rely on teacher assessments alone, but after pressure from teaching unions has decided that the papers will not be mandatory.

Mr Williamson said this year's grading plan is the "fairest possible system" for pupils and that the Government will "put our trust in teachers **rather than algorithms**".

The Education Secretary will also announce that grades should be **based only on the parts of the syllabus they have been taught** and that appeals will be made free and open to all.

Both A-level and GCSE results days **will be brought forward** in order to allow exam boards more time to process appeals ahead of university and college admission deadlines.

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But on Wednesday night, ministers were warned that students faced a "free for all" with **grade inflation** so rampant as to render results meaningless.

Sir Jon, who reportedly warned Mr Williamson about the perils of using an algorithm before **last summer's grades fiasco**, wrote on Twitter: "The Government is desperate not to be accused of having 'an algorithm' or of 'exams by the back door'. Focusing on this, rather than the actual goal - how we are going to be fair to young people - risks an outcome in August much worse than last year's."

He said that if "no algorithm" means no use of past data and if "no exams by the back door" means no common assessment taken under standard conditions, then "we really are lost", with his intervention threatening to undermine this year's plans.

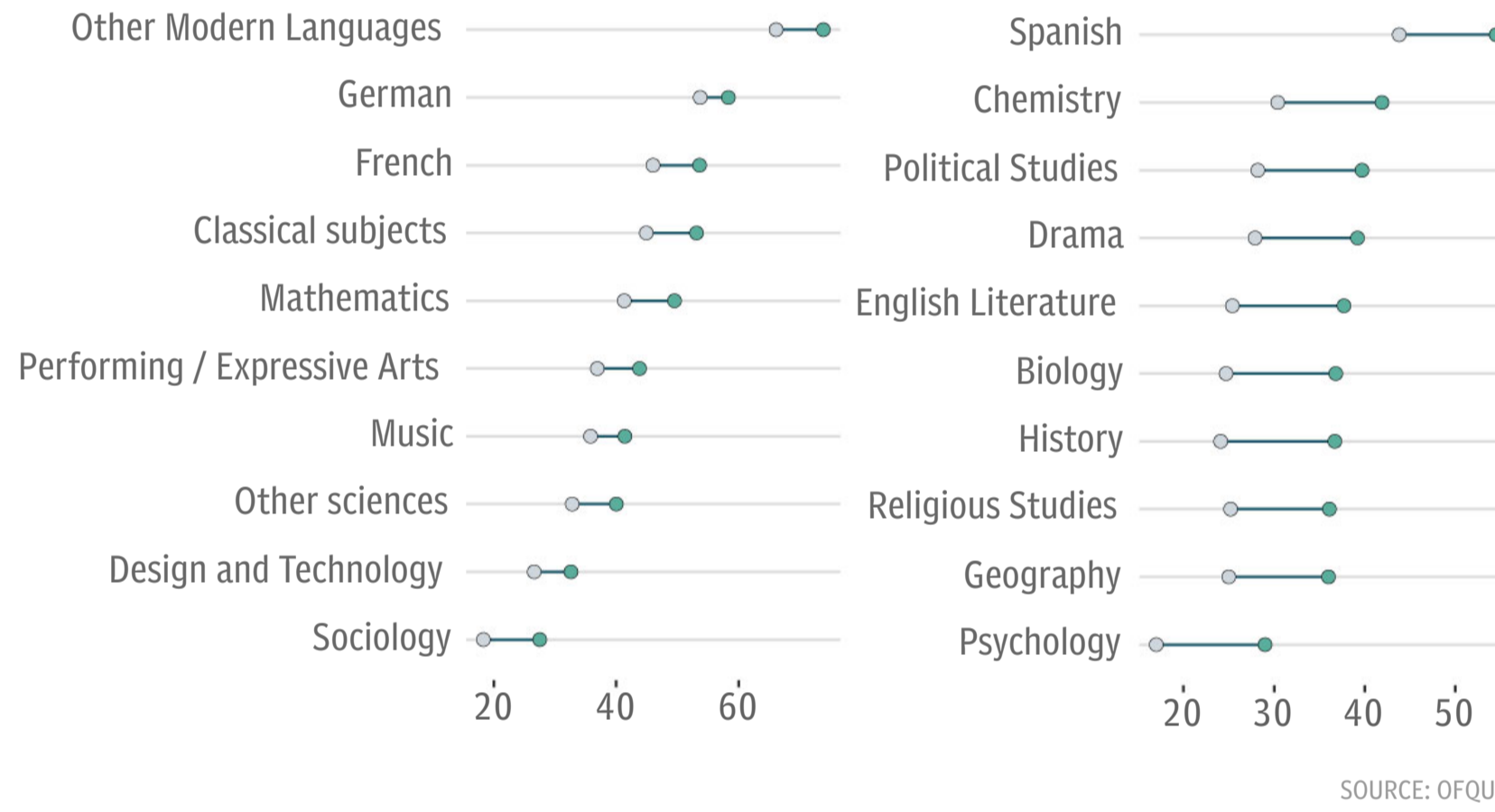
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Earlier this year, Ofqual's chief regulator, Simon Lebus, wrote to Mr Williamson to make the case for "externally set short papers", arguing that they would provide crucial evidence on which teachers could base predicted grades.

He said they would help make predictions "fairer and more consistent" by giving students "the chance to show what they can do in the same way" and would also make appeals "more straightforward".

However, The Telegraph understands that plans to make these papers mandatory were dropped following opposition from teaching unions. The decision was made after it became clear that schools **would not be reopening immediately after the February half-term** and has led to fears of mass grade inflation.

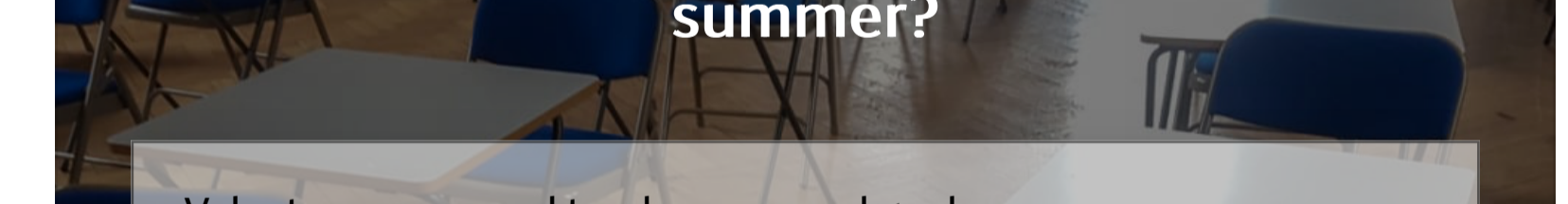
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Under the plans for this summer, teachers will be required to **produce evidence to justify their predicted grades**, which will become particularly important if students want to appeal. Exam boards will carry out spot checks and demand to see evidence from schools if their predicted grades are particularly high compared to previous years.

Ofqual is expecting a deluge of appeals, with results days for both A-levels and GCSEs moved to earlier in August so administrators have more time to process requests for grade reviews in time for university admissions deadlines.

Sir Jon declined to respond to requests for comment, but an Ofqual spokesman said: "In December 2020, we set up a committee that focused on implementation of arrangements for exams and assessments in 2021."

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