

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education

Via email: gavin.williamson.mp@parliament.uk

15 February 2021

**British International Schools Overseas, Cross-Association Response to:
GCSE, AS and A-Level Examinations in the Summer of 2021**

Dear Minister,

Introduction

We trust that this finds you and your colleagues at the Department for Education well. This is a joint cross-association letter following consultation with school leaders and CEOs from the following associations, which represent high-quality British international schools worldwide; The Association of British Schools Overseas (AoBSO), British Schools in the Middle East (BSME), Council of British International Schools (COBIS), Federation of British International Schools in Asia (FOBISIA), Latin American Heads Conference (LAHC) and National Association of British Schools in Spain (NABSS).

Each of our associations has responded individually to the formal consultation on awarding exam grades in the summer of 2021. In addition to individual consultation responses, this joint cross-association letter highlights significant and ongoing concerns which unify our associations. These are connected to the management of 2021 British public examinations by the DfE, Ofqual and exam boards and how they impact on the British international schools' sector.

These concerns have also been raised by a significant number of students, parents and a wide range of educational professionals based in schools, universities and other educational settings worldwide.

British Education as an Export

As you know, according to the Government's annual statement of Education export statistics which the Department for Education published on 17 December 2020, the figures for 2018 recorded that Education Exports have increased to £23.3Bn, an increase of 8.9% over the 2017 figure of £21.4Bn. These figures highlight that British education has become one of the UK's greatest exports and a valuable source of soft power across the world.

Continued confidence in British qualifications is a key component of growing the UK's global reputation for education, which is characterised by excellence and quality. Our associations have a deep and unfaltering commitment to strengthening the foundations for global success across the British Education sector.

These factors spotlight the importance of international education financially and as a quality product with an outstanding reputation. There is an imperative need for clear and ongoing government support, particularly during times of great uncertainty, so that these strong foundations established over time are not undermined.

International Examinations Survey – January 2021

In January 2021, associations conducted research within their memberships regarding UK and international examinations for summer 2021. Whilst a wide range of opinions were registered, some of the headline figures, based on responses are as follows:

BSME

- 53% of responding schools do not want the summer exam series to go ahead (53%)
- 47% of responding schools do want the summer exam series to go ahead.
- Schools which did not want the exam series to go ahead wanted the following forms of assessment instead.
- 91% of responding schools want Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) and Teacher Assessed Grades (TAGs) moderated internally and/or by exam boards through mark schemes and exemplars of evidence for moderation.

COBIS

- Given the ongoing impact of Covid-19, when asked how confident they were that examinations would be able to go ahead in their country in the summer, 43% of responding schools were somewhat confident and 35% were not at all confident
- While the majority of respondents felt that exams should not go ahead, the response was by no means unanimous. 69% of responding schools felt A-Levels should not go ahead; 90% felt GCSEs should not go ahead; 64% felt IGCSEs should not go ahead; 76% felt International A-Levels should not go ahead and 59% felt IB exams should not go ahead.
- In addition, 64% of responding schools thought that international awarding bodies should follow the same arrangements as what is announced by Ofqual for schools in England.

FOBISIA

- 98% of responding schools access IGCSE exams, 48% access GCSE and A Level exams and 42% access IB exams and 29% of respondents access IA-Levels.
- 52% of responding schools felt somewhat confident that exams would be able to go ahead this summer in their country.
- 23% of responding schools felt very confident, and the remainder were split between 13.5% feeling either very or not at all confident and 11.5% feeling that they would go ahead.
- 54% of respondents felt that the summer exams should not go ahead, while 46% felt they should.

LAHC

- Of 14 schools scheduled to sit exams in summer 2021, representing over 500 potential student entries, over 70% judge that it is either unlikely or extremely unlikely that their students would be able to sit exams in May/June. The majority would prefer to see grades based on teacher assessment.

All survey responses reinforce the fact that international schools are operating in a wide variety of different contexts, all with their own unique circumstances, and that there continue to be differing views about the best way forward. The free text responses in these surveys included some common and important themes which we feel are important to take into account. Examples are:

- concern with fairness, parity, and a level playing field for students;
- the need for awareness that international centres may be subject to changes in local circumstances or local regulations with little notice - for example, open today and ready for exams, but closed tomorrow without any room for maneuver and totally non-negotiable;

- the need for timely decisions on plans for 2021, taking into account the diverse range of local regulations, cultures and circumstances;
- the need for clear, consistent, timely communication and guidance from exam boards
- concern for the resulting pressure on students and teachers, which has given rise to significant concern for their mental health and well-being;
- increased workload for teachers and school leaders in connection to assessment writing, marking, moderating and allocating grades, managing appeals and additional administration;
- the requirement and importance of guidance and training for teachers in respect of defining standards and understanding grade boundaries;
- the lack of clarity as to how Special Consideration will be applied, what evidence will be required and how will weighting be applied to individual circumstances;
- the uncertainty as to how universities and employers in the UK and worldwide will interpret and view grades awarded in 2021.

In addition, a shared view across all our associations is that it is essential that grades awarded to students in 2021:

- command public confidence, both in the UK and internationally;
- are based on evidence of what students know and can do;
- benefit from a common and understood standard which is communicated internationally;
- are subject to a transparent and equitable appeals' process;
- take into account lost learning, which differs greatly across international regions and countries;
- reflect standards that are aligned with those used to award grades in the UK.

Potential Erosion of Confidence in British Qualifications

Our joint understanding is that approximately 1.5% of domestic A-Levels and 0.5% of domestic GCSEs are sat by international students based overseas. In addition, we understand that annually at least 10,000 A-Levels and 20,000 GCSEs are sat by international students studying overseas. A-Levels and GCSEs have a global reach and a well-recognised reputation as high-quality qualifications.

Every individual student's future is important to consider regardless of location. The cohort of young people who are currently studying overseas for British qualifications should not be overlooked or discounted. It is imperative that the impact which the outcome of this consultation will have on their short, medium and long-term futures is given every consideration.

We feel that the uncertainty and lack of clarity surrounding the summer session and the disparity between the positions of individual exam boards and that of the DfE are eroding the hard-earned reputation of British qualifications as being the global 'gold standard' and a popular, trusted and valuable pathway to higher education study at world-class British universities based both in the UK and at a growing number of satellite campuses based overseas.

At a time of great uncertainty, this is an opportunity for a much more cohesive cross-association approach with support and clarity from the government fundamental to the ongoing success of British international education. Anything short of that may have potentially negative consequences.

We urge the Department for Education to ensure that international exams are included in all future consultations and policy decisions, by entering into direct dialogue with exam boards and with the international schools' sector, through the associations represented here. To this end we reiterate our complete commitment to supporting the Department and all exam boards by maintaining both fully informed with regard to the conditions under which international schools are operating and in relation to the perceptions held by international stakeholders in British Education.

We do, of course, recognise the complex and unprecedented nature of the current circumstances, and appreciate the enormous challenges that both the Department and the exam boards face. As such, we hope that this letter fulfils its intention to provide constructive feedback and support in these difficult times.

Yours sincerely,

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Association of British Schools Overseas



Ms Olivia Roth, CEO
British Schools in the Middle East



Mr Colin Bell, CEO
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