

Consultation on GCSE, AS and A-Level Examinations in the Summer of 2021

Introduction - The Council of British International Schools

The Council of British International Schools (COBIS) is a membership association that represents more than 450 schools and organisations, globally. High-quality COBIS schools, which educate over 150,000 students and employ more than 30,000 teachers, can be found in 80 countries across Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and the Americas. In addition, COBIS represents the interests Supporting Associates, the majority of which are British. These companies provide a wide range of export services and resources to the international schools sector.

COBIS welcomes the invitation to respond to the consultation on awarding exam grades this summer. While COBIS has responded to the online consultation, this short paper provides a summary of our key points.

British Education as an Export

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. COBIS has a deep and unfaltering commitment to strengthening the foundations for global success across the Education sector. As the premiere association to represent British international schools worldwide, this is unapparelled. Our submission to this important consultation is framed to offer constructive feedback and support to what is unquestionably a complex matter.

COBIS International Examinations Survey – January 2021

In January 2021 COBIS conducted a survey regarding UK and international examinations in summer 2021. Whilst not unequivocal, some of the headline figures, based on responses from more than 60 COBIS schools based outside the UK, are as follows:

- 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% 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% 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; 59% felt IB exams should not go ahead
- 64% of respondents thought that international awarding bodies should follow the same arrangements as what is announced by Ofqual for schools in England

The 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. However, the free text responses included some common and important themes which this consultation should 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
- 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, COBIS views it as 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

Potential Erosion of Confidence in British Qualifications

COBIS understands that approximately 1.5% of domestic A-Levels and 0.5% of domestic GCSEs are sat by international students based overseas. In addition, COBIS understands 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 current 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.

Finally, on behalf of COBIS members, but reflecting a view we believe to be widely held across the sector, with two years of exam disruption and cancellations, there are genuine concerns that this is eroding the hard-earned reputation of British qualifications as being the global 'gold standard'. These genuine concerns also stretch to the potential erosion of confidence in British qualifications, which provide a popular, trusted and valuable pathway to higher education study at world-class British Universities based in the UK and at a growing number of satellite campuses based overseas.

Further information

For further information on the issues raised in the response, please contact:

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