

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today, on an issue that I know is exciting a great deal of thought and debate among education professionals, parents and students and especially so this summer and in light of the events last year.

The way we assess learners and award their qualifications is one of the most important forces that shapes our education system. It influences the behaviour of pupils and institutions, it influences the curriculum that is taught and how it is delivered, and it has huge consequences for the education and working lives of young people.

The qualifications you get at sixteen or eighteen drive the educational opportunities that are going to be open to you for the rest of your life and your future employment.

But in the last two years, we have seen the assessment system plunged into chaos.

Last year's exams fiasco saw grades awarded by an algorithm that left thousands of young people face the prospect of losing the opportunity to move on in their education or into work as they'd hoped to. Many felt utterly devastated. Yet that chaos, the anxiety it caused to students, and the pressure it placed on staff, could have been avoided if the government had worked properly with the sector, listened to experts, and acted on the warnings that they were given.

So, I had hoped we would have learned from last year's fiasco. But despite repeated pleas for a Plan B if exams couldn't proceed fairly this summer – pleas that came from many quarters, including education professionals, unions, and the Labour Party, and which we began making as long ago as last September – it took until January for ministers to make a decision to cancel this year's exams, at the very moment that some students were actually taking their BTECs.

And even now, despite the government having had a full academic year to put a plan in place, there are real risks of a repeat of last year's chaos. In the past few months, I've been meeting and listening to teachers, pupils and parents. Pupils and parents are worried about students getting the qualifications they need to move on in their education and about being treated fairly. Teachers and school leaders face a phenomenal workload to try to get qualifications right while keeping schools covid secure and keeping children safe and learning. They are fearful that when things go wrong, they'll be the ones blamed by the government, and by parents.

Sadly, I don't have much confidence about the 2022 exams series. We know that the consequences of the unprecedented disruption to their learning that students have faced in the last year is not simply coming to an end in September.

Year 10 pupils across the country have already missed an average of one in four days that should have been spent in the classroom, preparing for their GCSEs next summer. This vital time lost could have huge consequences for the exams they will be sitting less than a year from now, and for their opportunities in the future.

It is simply not credible to suggest that these pupils can return to school and sit their exams next year as if everything's been normal. And while Gavin Williamson does appear to have acknowledged this, we still have only vague platitudes about the need for adjustments to the system, when what students, their families and staff need is clarity and certainty.

And that really isn't acceptable. The government must urgently set out a clear plan, working with the sector.

And that's why I'm now calling on the secretary of state to set out the plan for next year by the 1st of September. Pupils and teachers need to know what the government have in mind when they return to the classroom and must be consulted so that their experience and expertise is respected in the process.

We know from the many practical and sensible suggestions made by the sector that there are entirely viable ways of doing this, ensuring pupils are assessed on what they have actually learned, not on what they've missed, and that children's very different experiences of the pandemic are fairly reflected in the assessment process.

By showing leadership, the government can bring the education system together and deliver a fair plan for young people. But time is fast running out, and ministers really must act as a matter of urgency.

Of course, the events of the last year have exposed not just the importance of getting exams right in a single exceptional year, but the deeper stresses and strains that underlie the system.

So last summer saw a huge amount of controversy when grades were awarded following the application of the algorithm. But although we hadn't seen such a reaction to the use of algorithms in previous years, of course, they've had a major impact on the grades and qualifications that have been awarded even in normal years.

Meanwhile, the disruption to children's learning caused by covid, and the cancellation of exams, highlighted risks that inherent in a system that relies heavily on a single terminal exam being taken by students

And the concerns that already existed that some children leave school entirely without qualifications, without what they have achieved being recognised, became starker than ever when we considered the number of children who are going to leave school over the next few years unable fully to recover their lost learning and demonstrate their full potential.

But, important though they are, I have to say that these concerns don't give anyone a free pass to do away with exams altogether. The use of centre-assessed grades has highlighted the deficiencies of alternative approaches, which cannot simply be wished away without serious consideration. Relying on teachers grading students' work has created an enormous burden on staff, heightened fears of confrontation between parents, students and teachers, and with wide variations having occurred in the way students' work has been assessed, posed serious questions about fairness.

So, as we emerge from the pandemic, we have to learn from the lessons of the last year and create a system that is both fairer and more secure, one that we design in dialogue with children, staff, families, educational institutions and employers, to forge a new national consensus.

But that is not something that we can achieve in a vacuum, only thinking about the assessment system. Rethinking assessment must be part of holistic reform of our education system. Assessments do not just reflect our education system and the learning it contains, they shape it, with a system of incentives that impact both learners and institutions. But they must also be driven by what we want education to achieve for young people.

And that's why our assessment system must be built on the same principles as our education system as a whole – one that offers opportunities for all whatever their background, that puts high standards and fairness at its heart, and that gives all young people a broad, balanced curriculum that sets them on the path to learn and earn throughout their life journey.

Too often the existing system does not achieve these goals.

The use of high-stakes exams can have a distorting effect on what is taught and learned, despite the best efforts of dedicated teachers.

Time and again we've heard of certain subjects being squeezed out of the curriculum because they are not assessed, or do not feature as prominently in accountability measures, with the arts among the first subjects to be lost, despite their huge importance in delivering an enriching education.

We remain an outlier in putting students through a system of multiple terminal exams at GCSE level, setting pupils on a relatively narrow path that sees many young people studying only three subjects after the age of 16. It is in part because of the structure of our system of assessments and qualifications that the options available to pupils are often too narrow, specialism starts too soon, and fewer subjects are studied at a relatively young age, shutting pupils out of opportunities that could be hugely valuable for them later in their life or education.

And we still fail to equip young people with the skills that employers say they most value. If we really want to prepare young people for the future, they must be able to study a mix of academic and vocational subjects. And we must recognise that skills, creativity and knowledge go hand in hand together.

These are the challenges I believe we need to resolve, and that I know that you too are thinking deeply about. I'm really delighted to with you here today to hear your thoughts and ideas, about the curriculum, about the format, timing and volume of assessments, about the role of teachers, exam boards, regulators and inspectors, about what fairness looks like, and about how our assessment system can be a catalyst for young people's future success, not an obstacle to it. In short, I'm looking forward to hearing from you about what shape our

education system should take, what we want to achieve, and how our system of assessment can enable that.

I don't believe we should satisfy ourselves with lazy answers to these questions because there's too much at stake for our young people. And I very much look forward to today's discussion.