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9 June 2020

Dear Sarah

BCS School Curriculum and Assessment Committee (SCAC) response to Ofqual's consultation on the arrangements for the Autumn examination series 2020

The BCS SCAC has responded to Ofqual's consultation through the online form. This letter summarises the key points made in the committee's response.

In drawing up this response, the BCS SCAC took the views of Computing at School (CAS) members through an online survey of Computing at School (CAS) members. The questions we asked were drawn directly from the Ofqual consultation document. Responses were asked for on a 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree=1; strongly agree =5) and 29 CAS members responded. This relatively modest number of responses may reflect the fact that we also encouraged the CAS community to respond directly to your online consultation.

In an Appendix to this letter we give a summary of the results of the survey.

As before, we would like to congratulate Ofqual on your approach to this significant challenge. Qualifications are important for young people's life chances and the coherence and smooth functioning of education as a whole. Our response focusses on three key issues: examination format, the role of Non-Examined Assessment in A level Computer Science, and the need for flexibility.

THE FORMAT OF THE EXAMINATION

1. Like Ofqual, we recognise the challenge to centres of administering examinations in the Autumn. However, on balance, we also agree that any change to the number of examinations or the format of the papers would be unfair to candidates, especially given the challenge of producing sample material to illustrate any changes in time to help candidates prepare.
2. This view was supported by responses from the CAS community, with 73% of responses agreeing or strongly agreeing with Ofqual's proposal to keep the same number of papers and 69% agreeing that the papers should be in the same format as usual.

THE ROLE OF NON EXAMINED ASSESSMENT (NEA)

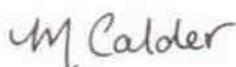
3. The NEA forms 20% of the marks for A level Computer Science. It is an important part of the qualification as it assesses candidates' knowledge of programming in depth. This subject knowledge and the ability to apply it to challenging programming tasks is particularly valued by universities. The committee thought long and hard about Ofqual's proposal for the NEA not to count towards the Autumn examinations, including bringing together a small number of practitioners with examination experience with the chair of the CAS Assessment sub-committee. This group also took soundings from teachers and awarding bodies.
4. After much discussion and attempts to find alternatives, this group concluded that Ofqual's proposal for the NEA not to count in the autumn is the only practical solution. We agreed that there was no way of 'reverse engineering' NEA marks given the timing of the lockdown and the widely differing circumstances in schools since then.
5. The proposal of not counting the NEA was supported by 55% of the CAS respondents, with 28% disagreeing and the remaining 17% neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Where respondents that disagreed with the NEA not counting made comments, they raised issues of fairness, but did not say how this might be achieved.
6. While the committee supports Ofqual's proposal, it is in its view the 'least worst' option. The committee would have concerns if this was taken by Ofqual (or anyone else) as a precedent for future policy direction with regard to the NEA. The previous decision to remove the NEA from counting towards GCSE was not without problems, and the committee is particularly keen that decisions made in response to exceptional circumstances are not seen as fixed for the future. The committee encourages Ofqual to stress this in all communications, and we would be happy to work with Ofqual to reassure computing teachers about this.

THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY

7. The committee strongly agrees with the need for flexibility, as do those responding to the CAS survey. The last two survey questions about flexibility received over 90% support. Some respondents commented on uncertainty about the Autumn if there is a second wave of lockdowns. ('This is an optimistic move in a time of uncertainty', 'Who knows who has suffered hardship or bereavement and should not be put through this or only very responsibly or on a flexible system basis'. 'Timing needs to be based on public health concerns').

As always, we would be delighted to discuss these issues with you, though we recognise the immense pressures facing Ofqual will impact on your ability to hold one-to-one discussions.

Yours sincerely



Professor Muffy Calder OBE FEng FRSE
Chair, BCS School Curriculum & Assessment Committee
Vice-Principal and Head of College of Science and Engineering, University of Glasgow

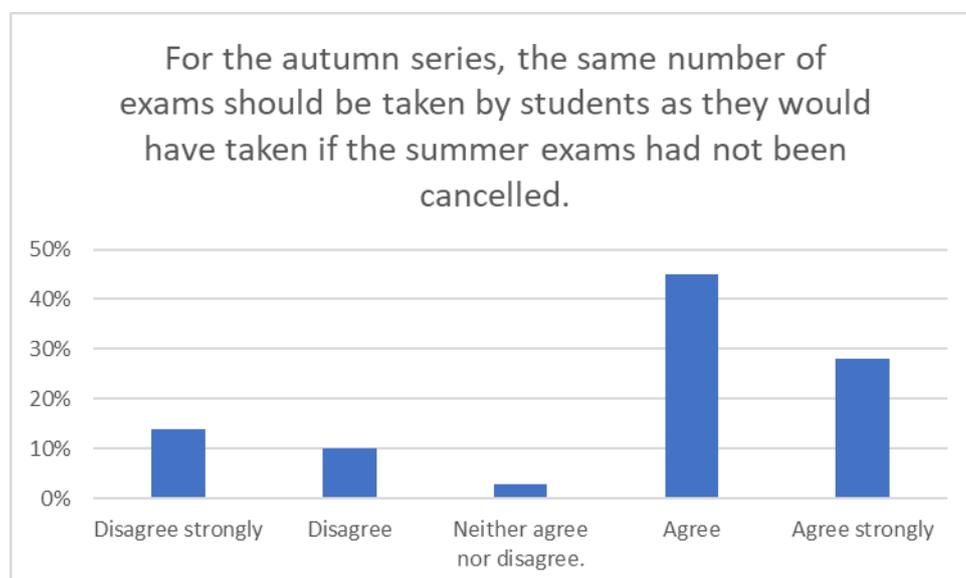
ANNEX: CAS Members' responses to the BCS SCAC survey on Ofqual's consultation on Autumn exam series

Overall 29 respondents completed this questionnaire during the period 28 May to 8 June 2020.

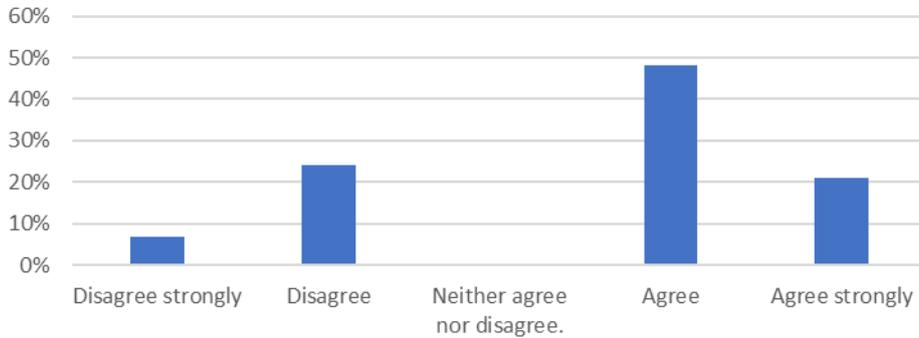
To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

Survey Question:	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree.	Agree	Agree strongly	Mean
For the autumn series, the same number of exams should be taken by students as they would have taken if the summer exams had not been cancelled.	14%	10%	3%	45%	28%	3,62
The exams taken in the autumn series should be in the same format (e.g. duration and number of papers) for each qualification as those normally taken in the summer series	7%	24%	0%	48%	21%	3.52
Grades for A level Computer Science awarded in the autumn should be based only on students' performance in their exams, with no non-exam assessment	14%	14%	17%	31%	24%	3.38
Ofqual should put in place provisions that allow the exam boards to offer exams from October 2020, with the exact start and finish dates being confirmed by Ofqual when the position on the re-opening of schools and colleges is clearer	0%	3%	0%	62%	34%	4.28
Ofqual should build some flexibility into the regulatory framework to enable them to vary the start and finish dates of the series if that is necessary because of the public health situation	3%	0%	7%	45%	45%	4.28

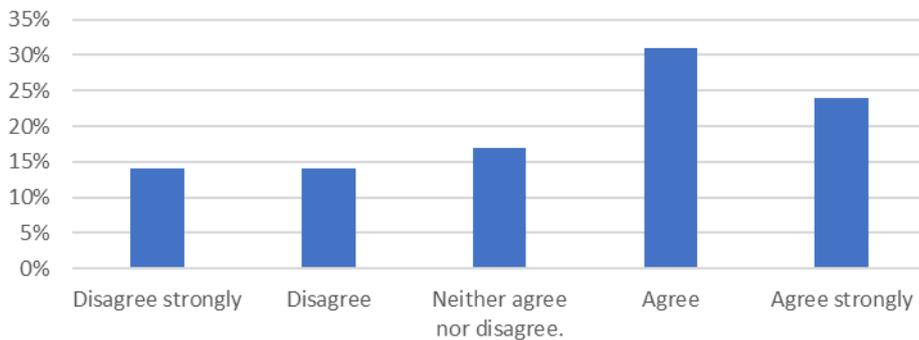
The following bar charts illustrate graphically the proportions of responses



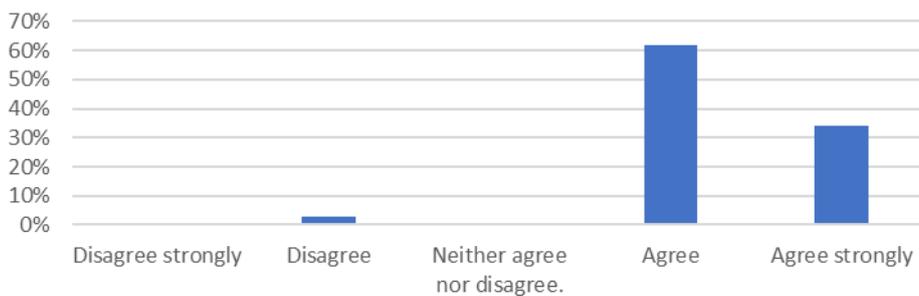
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