

External Quality Assurance process summary

The process of external quality assurance conducted by exam boards this summer is designed to check that schools and colleges have determined grades in an appropriate way, consistent with the approaches they said they would adopt in their Centre Policies. JCQ set out the requirements of the centre policy in the [JCQ Guidance on the determination of AS A level and GCSE Grades](#), based on regulatory expectations. This document covers the external quality assurance process for England only.

Background

The context for conducting quality assurance this summer was provided by the Secretary of State in his direction letter to the Chief Regulator of Ofqual on 23 February 2021:

“It is government policy that exam boards should provide centres with clear requirements for their own quality assurance processes, to promote a consistent approach to determine grades, a view held by over 70 per cent of consultation respondents. I expect Heads of Centre to be required to provide a formal declaration about the accuracy and integrity of the grades submitted and the processes supporting them.”

“The guidance provided by the exam boards should include advice on how centres can use their previous performance data from when exams and other forms of evidence were taken to benchmark their 2021 teacher determined grades. It should also state how to access further information and support if centres have questions or need clarification. Students should have their grades determined by the standard of their work but the use of a centre’s previous performance data by schools and colleges at an aggregate level could play a useful role in informing grading judgements. I do not expect it to be used as a basis for determining or making changes to the results of individual students. Changes to a student’s grade should only be made based on the evidence of their performance and as a result of human intervention at the centre or the exam board.”

“As well as the checks and balances that centres will employ themselves, it is right in the government’s view, and that of over two thirds of consultation respondents, that the exam boards provide an additional layer of scrutiny to ensure centres adhere to the exam boards’ requirements.”

“These quality assurance arrangements should focus on making sure the process and evidence used by centres to award grades are reasonable. The exam boards should be required to undertake checks of all centres’ internal quality assurance processes before grades are submitted to them.”

“It is the government’s view that the exam boards’ quality assurance should also include checks of samples of the evidence to support students’ proposed grades. These checks of evidence will help ensure centres have undertaken an appropriate and robust process for determining grades and reviewing their judgements to promote fairness in the awarding of grades. Where robust investigation indicates that a centre’s grades might not be justified, the exam board should ask the centre to investigate.”

“If the exam board is not satisfied with the outcome of this investigation or malpractice is found, exam boards should reserve the right to adjust or withhold grades. Changes to the grades submitted

should only be made in the quality assurance process where grades cannot be justified based on the evidence provided, rather than as a result of marginal differences of opinion.”

Further regulatory requirements were also outlined in Ofqual’s General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework, and further information for centres was available in Ofqual’s [Information for Heads of Centre](#) guidance.

External Quality Assurance process

The external quality assurance process involved initial contact, and then took place in three stages. In summary:

Initial contact: Exam boards contacted all schools and colleges to talk through the 2021 awarding process and requirements, including the need to complete and submit a Centre Policy and Summary. Contact was also made to discuss the expectations of the centre policy which included how evidence would be collected and historic data taken into account in determining grades, and the approach for private candidates.

Stage 1: All schools and colleges were required to submit a Centre Policy stating how they would determine grades within their centre, [based on JCQ guidance](#). Exam boards reviewed information provided by every centre.

Stage 2: Virtual centre visits were conducted by exam boards, following the review of Centre Policies, where it was considered further support and guidance may have been required to produce teacher assessed grades which fully reflected students’ performance.

Stage 3: The final stage of the quality assurance process was to check that centres have implemented what was in their submitted Centre Policies and that the submitted grades are a reasonable exercise of academic judgement according to the submitted evidence.

Stage 3 quality assurance process

Every centre was required to provide evidence of student work in order to complete the Stage 3 quality assurance process in an efficient manner and minimise pressure on centres closer to the end of term. All teacher assessed grade submissions were reviewed in detail by exam boards and an initial sample of centres were selected for review. Some centres were selected based on a set of risk-based criteria, while others were included at random to ensure appropriate qualification, geographical and centre-type coverage.

Centres selected for review

The criteria used to select centres, as part of the risk-based sample, in the Stage 3 process included:

- reflections from previous Stages of the quality assurance process;
- where a centre’s overall results profile for this summer’s cohort appeared to diverge significantly (relative to other centres) compared to the profiles for cohorts from previous years when exams had taken place;
- whether the centre is a new centre;
- the late submission of teacher assessed grades (taking any mitigating circumstances into account);
- credible whistle-blowing allegations; and
- any appropriate information from the summer 2020 series.

Exam boards considered these factors for all centres and created a rank order based on potential risk. The JCQ discussed this approach with the Office for Statistics Regulation. Those centres with a higher overall centre risk score were selected for review. The review was carried out by subject experts to establish whether a reasonable exercise of academic judgement to the submitted sample of work was applied, according to the centres' policy. A professional discussion was then undertaken with centres to ensure that grades were justified on the evidence of student performance and in accordance with the centres' policy.

How historical performance was included in the centre selection process

For each centre in England¹, exam boards calculated the difference at each grade (aggregated across subjects) between the cumulative proportion of students at that grade in 2021 compared to the centre's historical profile, for each qualification group (GCSE and/or A-level). For A-level, exam boards used each centre's overall grade distribution for all subjects combined between 2017 – 2019. For GCSE, exam boards used each centre's overall grade distribution for reformed subjects only, in 2018 and 2019. The choice of years to include reflected the respective reform timetables for these qualifications.

For the purposes of their analysis, exam boards took the largest difference observed at any grade. For example, if a centre's largest difference at A level was a 10 percentage point change at grade B, this was considered to be their centre-level difference for A level. Lower outcomes in 2021 compared to previous years were considered in the same way as higher outcomes.

The outcomes of the above² were combined with the other criteria to assign an overall centre risk score. Schools and colleges, identified with the highest levels of risk, were selected for review in the Stage 3 of the quality assurance process.

Centres selected at random

The random sample included for verification in Stage 3 was divided by centre type within geographical region.

Regional Schools Commissioner areas were used to define geographical regions of England: North of England, Lancashire and West Yorkshire, West Midlands, East Midlands and the Humber East of England and North-East London, South-East England and South London, North-West London and South-Central England, South-West England, and a combined grouping consisting of Wales, Scotland, Crown Dependencies and overseas centres³ (due to small numbers of eligible centres in the non-overseas areas listed), were also used.

¹ Centres in Wales and Scotland were solely subject to their national regulators' quality assurance processes. CCEA Awarding Organisation carried out its own QA process. Further information on the CCEA Summer 2021 process can be found at <https://ccea.org.uk/summer-2021>. The sampling process carried out by non CCEA Awarding Organisations in Northern Ireland was aligned to that of CCEA, with every centre in Northern Ireland sampled as part of this process.

² Exam boards accommodated in the calculations the tendency for smaller centres to exhibit greater variability in results year on year and for some centres to offer just GCSE or A level qualifications.

³ Centres taking English-regulates qualifications.

There are 14 centre types in the JCQ classification, including six forms of secondary school, academies, free schools, independent centres, types of college and other centres. Some of these categories are small, and were grouped so that a fair stratification could be produced. Centres outside of the UK which had no centre type were classified as 'other'.

Subject selection

Exam boards requested evidence for at least 1 A level subject and 2 GCSE subjects from each centre, where possible. The following principles were applied by exam boards in the selection of subjects for each centre, in order of importance:

- To comply with the Ofqual guidance, the boards requested either GCSE English Language or GCSE mathematics, another GCSE, and an A level to be selected (unless the centre did not enter one of these types of qualification).
- Wherever possible, centres were asked to submit student work for three subjects that they entered with the same board in order to ease the administrative burden for centres.
- That, within that constraint, the selection of subjects was randomised, but with each subject weighted according to the size of entry (so that a large entry subject in a centre, such as GCSE English literature, was more likely to be selected than a small entry subject in the same centre).

The rationale for this prioritisation was in part so that the subjects most likely to have an impact on a centre's overall results were appropriately targeted.

Candidate evidence selection

For each subject selected, centres were required to provide evidence from at least five students. Those selected included at least one student in each centre with the highest grade achieved in that subject, and at least one student with the lowest grade in that cohort.

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