



Joint Council for  
Qualifications<sup>CIC</sup>

Report

# Stage 3 of the General Qualification Quality Assurance (QA) Model in Summer 2021

Produced on behalf of:



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# An introduction to the External Quality Assurance process

The process of external quality assurance conducted by exam boards in summer 2021 was designed to check that schools and colleges had determined grades in an appropriate way, consistent with the approaches they said they would adopt in their Centre Policies, and in line with the requirements set out by JCQ in its Guidance on the determination of AS, A level and GCSE Grades. This guidance was, in turn, based on Ofqual's regulatory expectations.

This document provides a technical description of the external quality assurance process for Ofqual-regulated GCSE, AS and A level qualifications. Exam boards put separate processes in place for the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) and the Advanced Extension Award in Mathematics. The purpose of the document is to explain the process in detail, to aid further understanding of the process, its aims and objectives.

## Background

The context for conducting quality assurance in summer 2021 was provided by the Secretary of State in his **Direction letter** to the Chief Regulator of Ofqual on 23 February 2021, highlighting the following requirements:

- exam boards should provide centres with clear requirements for their own quality assurance processes, to promote a consistent approach to determine grades;
- that Heads of Centre would be required to provide a formal declaration about the accuracy and integrity of the grades submitted and the processes supporting them;
- exam board guidance 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;
- exam boards' quality assurance should also include checks of samples of the evidence to support students' proposed 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.

Having regard to the Direction, Ofqual's decisions on the arrangements for summer 2021 were reflected in Ofqual's **General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework (GQAAF)**, which set out the requirements on exam boards. Further information for centres was made available in **Ofqual's Information for Heads of Centre guidance**, and in **JCQ's guidance for centres**.

## The External Quality Assurance process

The external quality assurance process involved initial contact with centres, 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 to the exam board a Centre Policy and a summary of that policy. The discussions also covered 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 about the policies 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. In some instances, exam boards required centres to make changes to, and resubmit, their policies where issues were identified; these policies were then reviewed again on re-submission.

**Stage 3:** The final stage of the quality assurance process was to check that centres had implemented what was in their submitted Centre Policies, had adopted an approach in line with JCQ's requirements, and that the submitted grades were a reasonable exercise of academic judgement according to the submitted evidence. Every centre was included in this part of the process, although – in accordance with the GQAAF and consistently with the Direction – Stage 3 checks were undertaken for a sample of centres. Centres were only required to make changes to the grades submitted where grades could not be justified based on the evidence provided, rather than as a result of marginal differences of opinion. Checks were undertaken by subject expert reviewers.

For each selected centre, a subject expert reviewed the first sampled subject. If the review confirmed that the process had been followed correctly and that the evidence supported teachers' judgements, the second and third subjects were not reviewed; if a potential issue was identified, the second and third subjects were reviewed in order to establish whether the issue was general within the centre, or specific to the selected subject.

The focus of this Technical Report is Stage 3 of the process. Ofqual's *GCSE, AS and A level Summer Report 2021* contains further information on the outputs and outcomes of the quality assurance process for centres in England.

## Stage 3

The GQAAF, consistently with the Secretary of State's direction to Ofqual, set out high-level requirements for the selection of centres for review at Stage 3. For each selected centre, the review was carried out by subject experts. Their role was to establish if the centre had conducted a reasonable exercise of academic judgement, in accordance with the centre's policy, when grading the work of candidates selected for review. Where issues were identified, a professional discussion was then undertaken with centres to ensure that grades were justified on the evidence of student performance and had been determined in accordance with the centres' policy and JCQ guidance.

JCQ designed a two-phase approach to sampling. The sampling process covered all centres entered for Ofqual-regulated GCSEs, AS and A levels; some exceptions were made for aspects of the process, in line with the geographical scope set out below. JCQ finalised the requirements for the main run of the sampling process following testing and quality assurance of the process. The JCQ discussed this approach with the Office for Statistics Regulation.

### Geographical scope

All centres with entries for the qualifications outlined above were included in the sampling process. Some exceptions were put in place to prevent undue burden for centres that were already subject to quality assurance overseen by other regulators and/or institutions. Requirements for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were agreed with those nations' regulators: CCEA Regulation, SQA and Qualifications Wales.

- Centres in **England** were subject to all elements of the sampling process.
- Centres in **Northern Ireland** with entries for a relevant Ofqual-regulated general qualification were included in all elements of the sampling process.
- Centres in **Scotland** with entries for a relevant Ofqual-regulated general qualification were eligible for all aspects of the selection process, unless they were also entered for Scottish National Courses, in which case they were not included in any aspect of Stage 3 sampling.
- Centres in **Wales** with entries for a relevant Ofqual-regulated general qualification were eligible for all aspects of the selection process, unless they were also entered for Qualifications Wales-regulated general qualifications (GCSE, AS and A levels), in which case they were not included in any aspect of Stage 3 sampling.
- Centres in **Crown Dependencies** (the Bailiwicks of Jersey and Guernsey, and the Isle of Man), and **overseas centres**, were included in the selection of the random sample only (see Phase 1 description, below).

### Phase 1

Phase 1 of the sampling process selected the majority of centres in the final sample and was designed ahead of the submission of grades. The sample design included a random selection and a risk-based targeted selection. 1000 centres were selected in Phase 1; 400 selected at random and 600 selected for the targeted sample. The ratio of random and targeted sample sizes balanced the need for all centres to have a reasonable chance of being selected for review and ensure that the overall selection represented all types of centre adequately, alongside the requirement to review those centres deemed to be at the highest risk of not applying a grading process aligned with JCQ guidance.

#### *Phase 1 random sample*

The random sample of centres was designed to be representative of centre type and 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 centres (due to small numbers of eligible centres in the non-overseas areas listed). For the purposes of the random sample, Northern Ireland was treated as a single and separate geographical category.

School numbers are more balanced between these areas than the alternative Regions of England classification, and relate to a set of defined areas that are currently in use within the education sector. Of particular importance was to ensure that there were no centre-type groups within areas that had small numbers of centres, as this could cause issues with fairness in sample selection. A list of how local authorities and counties map to RSC areas can be found on the **Department for Education website**.

Northern Ireland, and a combined grouping consisting of Wales, Scotland, Crown Dependencies and overseas centres (due to small numbers of eligible centres in the non-overseas areas listed), were included as additional geographical categories for the selection of the random sample, along with the eight England regions described above.

### ***Centre type classification***

There were 14 centre types in the JCQ classification, including six categories of secondary school, as well as academies, free schools, independent centres, three types of college and other centres. Some of these categories have low numbers of centres, meaning that they had to be grouped so that all centres had a similar probability of selection.

Each centre's classification was drawn from the **JCQ National Centre Number register** in March 2021, with any unclassified centres reviewed in May. Where a classification was unavailable for centres in the UK (two centres), a manual review was undertaken to determine the appropriate category. Centres outside of the UK which had no centre type were classified as 'other'.

Due to small numbers of colleges and 'other' centres in Northern Ireland, these centres could not be selected without a manual adjustment to the sampling method. This was resolved in Phase 2 on the selection process (see later section in this report), by selecting one centre at random from this group. This ensured that all centres had a similar probability of selection.

### ***Phase 1 risk-based targeted sample***

All teacher assessed grade submissions were reviewed in detail by exam boards. From this analysis, an initial sample of centres were selected for a review of evidence.

Several criteria were used to select centres, as part of the risk-based **targeted** sample of centres, in the Stage 3 process. These criteria were as follows:

**New centre for 2021.** For the purposes of this process, a new centre was defined as any centre with no historical data that could be used to rank the centre in terms of difference in outcomes from previous years for either GCSE or A level.

**Credible whistle-blowing allegations in (2021).** These were, defined as allegations received by awarding organisations regarding a centre's TAG process which did not provide sufficient grounds for formal action to be taken by malpractice investigation teams, but which would, if true, mean that the centre had failed to follow the published guidelines for determining grades. Where there were sufficient grounds for formal action, exam boards followed up via a malpractice investigation.

**Information arising from the summer 2020 series.** A number of factors relating to residual causes from concern from the 2020 were included, such as centres flagged as a cause for concern following: a whistle blowing case, complaint or issues raised at appeal.

**Centre policy: continuing concerns at end of QA Stage 2.** Summaries of all centres' assessment policies were reviewed at stages 1 and 2 of the quality assurance process. Where concerns remained following the stage 2 review, the centre was flagged; exam boards continued to engage with these centres, who were expected to resolve outstanding issues with their policies.

**Anomalous entries for 2021.** Centres whose patterns of entries were identified as differing significantly from their typical pattern of entry in previous years. Exam boards undertook follow-up activities with centres that were identified under this criterion, to understand the reasons for the pattern of entries.

**Submitted grades in 2021 which appear significantly lower or higher than past performance.** This is defined in more detail below.

**Late submission of 2021 grades.** Centres that had submitted under 90% of a centre's total entry for a qualification type, by the grade submission deadline of 18th June, were identified as higher risk.

Exam boards considered these factors for all centres in England and for centres outside of England where necessary<sup>1</sup>, and created a rank order based on potential risk. Those centres with a higher overall centre risk score were selected for review in Phase 1.

### **Calculation of centre risk scores**

For each centre, 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**.

To calculate each centre's risk score, exam boards took the largest difference in cumulative percentage outcome between the grades submitted and the historical data observed at each grade, separately for each qualification group (GCSE and/or A level). 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 outputs of the above<sup>2</sup> were combined with the other phase 1 criteria to assign an overall centre risk score that was used to rank centres. Schools and colleges, identified with the highest levels of risk, were selected for scrutiny in the Stage 3 of the quality assurance process, within the targeted sample.

All grades had to be signed off by the Head of Centre as part of the submission process. Most centres submitted their grades prior to the deadline, and these centres were processed in line with the full process above. Not all centres submitted sufficient grades to allow for a comparison of 2021 and historical grade profiles, however. To ensure that all centres could be selected in the targeted sample, these 'unsubmitted' centres were included in the targeting process on the basis of the other elements of the risk score. The number of centres selected for review from the two groups of centres ('submitted' and 'unsubmitted') was proportionate to the number of centres included in each, to ensure that all centres in England could be selected for the risk-based targeted sample.

### **Selection of subjects and students**

Every centre was required to provide evidence of student work shortly after the grade submission deadline, 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. For each centre, exam boards selected a sample of up to five students in each of three subjects, also selected by exam boards. Centres were asked to submit the work of the students selected by the boards. Although the review focused on a sample of subjects and students in each selected centre, the purpose of Stage 3 was to review centres' implementation of the process across GCSE, AS and A level, not just in the selected subjects.

Exam boards required evidence for at least 1 A level subject and 2 GCSE subjects from each centre. To comply with the Ofqual guidance, where possible, this included:

- a) either GCSE English language or GCSE mathematics, due to their importance in enabling students' progression to the next stage in their education and/or employment;
- b) another GCSE (GCSE English language and GCSE mathematics were not both selected for a centre unless the centre had not entered students for any other GCSEs);
- c) an A level.

If a centre did not enter students for GCSEs, two A levels were selected. If a centre did not enter students for A levels, no third subject was selected.

In selecting which subjects/qualifications to prioritise for sampling the boards took account of criteria such as the overall entry size for the qualification, to ensure appropriate balance and representation. If a centre had entered multiple qualifications within the same subject grouping, the qualification with the largest entry was selected. The **JCQ classification of subject groups used for results statistics** was used for this purpose.

The prioritisation ensured that the subjects most likely to have an impact on a centre's overall results were appropriately targeted.

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<sup>1</sup> 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://ceea.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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

For each subject selected, centres were required to provide evidence from five students, chosen by the exam boards to cover the range of grades determined by the centre in that subject. Where a centre's entry in a tiered subject was not split between exam boards, candidates were selected from both tiers. All students with a valid entry were eligible for selection, including private candidates. If a selected subject was classed as 'late' for grade submission, the selection of candidates was random.

For centres in Northern Ireland, only one subject was sampled, mirroring the quality assurance process implemented for CCEA-regulation general qualifications.

## Phase 2

The targeted approach to selecting centres for review stated in the Direction and the GQAAF informed the Phase 1 approach. The purpose of Phase 2 was to mitigate risks associated with the profile of centres selected for review in Phase 1, and to respond to any emerging patterns of performance identified after grades had been collated and analysed. The Department for Education and Ofqual were consulted on this process.

171 additional centres (from England and elsewhere) were selected for review in Phase 2. Additional centres were selected after a review of the Phase 1 sample to resolve any gaps in the sample and ensure centres high ranking on key criteria and not otherwise selected were included.