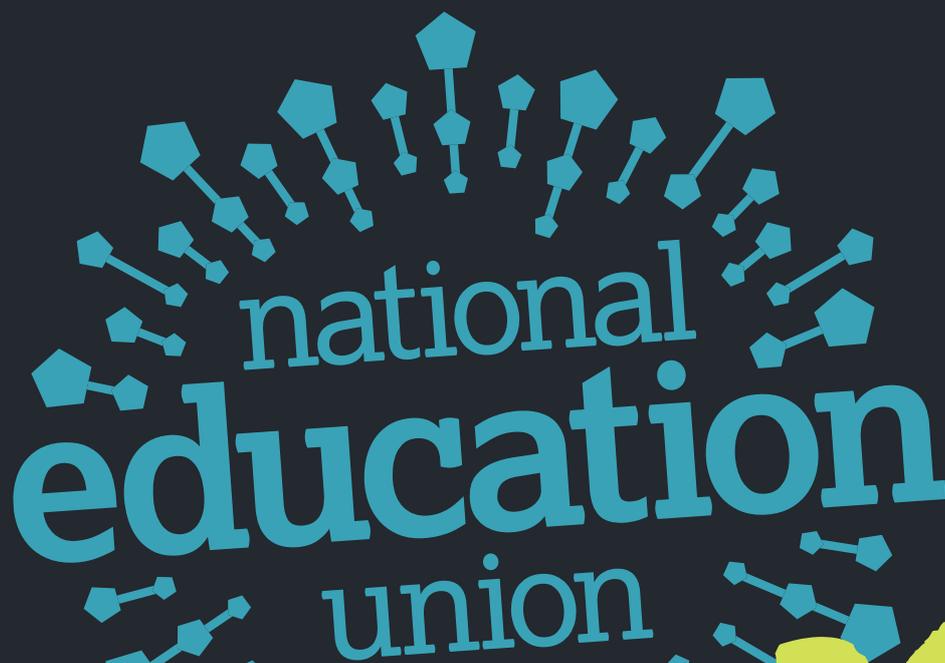


Exams guidance

**Joint Council for
Qualifications exam
board guidance on the
awarding of GCSE, AS
and A-level grades in
summer 2021**



#FAIRGRADE2021

Joint Council for Qualifications exam board guidance on the awarding of GCSE, AS and A-level grades in summer 2021

[JCQ guidance document, templates for the process and grade descriptors for A-levels, AS levels and GCSEs.](#)

This guidance is for the awarding of GCSEs, AS and A-levels in England in summer 2021. Awarding organisations (AOs) who offer vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), including BTECs and Cam Techs but also other VTQs which are less similar to GCSEs and A-levels, have said they will provide separate guidance for these qualifications in due course. We will create a separate page with this guidance once it is available

This guidance refers to the overall procedure and applies to all awarding organisations offering GCSEs, AS and A-Levels in England (AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson). The documents on the JCQ website have been created and signed off by all these awarding organisations, in conjunction, via their membership body the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ). As such they apply to any GCSE, AS or A-level course you might be running.

Subject specific guidance, exemplars and additional assessment materials may vary depending on the specification of the course offered by each awarding organisation and you should access this information from the board that offers the course your students sit.

Page 9 of the JCQ guidance document provides links to each individual AO's web page for information specific to that organisation.

The information in this guidance should be read alongside our guidance about planning for the process which can be found [here](#).

The JCQ document, which can be found [here](#), spells out what is expected within the process. Below is some NEU guidance on key things to take note of:

Objectivity of grades

- It is important that grades are as objective as possible. See the [Ofqual guidance on objectivity](#) and ensure that conversations about avoiding biases and making objective judgements take place in each subject, before assessing begins.
- Analysis of objectivity and that evidence supports grading decisions should also form a part of the internal quality assurance (IQA) process. As a centre's IQA process needs to be submitted to boards by 30th April it is important that conversations happen soon about how this will work in your centre.

Differences from last year

- Unlike last year you are not being asked what you think a student would have achieved on an exam but rather what grade the evidence of their work/assessments demonstrates.
- Another difference from last year is that you are not being asked to rank order students. Grades should be awarded on the basis of the evidence for that individual student and not in comparison to any others.

What to assess students on and what to use in order to do so

- Students should only be assessed on topics they could be expected to have covered but also on as much of the course as is possible. This is to take into account the context of their experience with learning over the duration of the course, because of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Additional assessment materials and exam-style questions/tests/papers may well be useful in your setting and would be one way of objectively evidencing student performance. However, there is flexibility in the evidence that can be used and no one type of evidence is mandatory, including exam-style question papers.
- The guidance points to [Ofqual's information about the types of assessment evidence that can be used](#) but this list is not exhaustive and if there is other work you think would be relevant this can be included. However, the types of evidence you intend to use to inform grades in your centre must be clear in the policy your centre submits to the boards, to allow them to sign it off.
- Boards have said that they can be contacted by individual schools and colleges, or heads of department, in order to seek assistance on whether certain types of evidence would be appropriate.

Students' and parents' input

- Boards have been clear that the types of evidence used to award grades is a decision for education staff in the school or college and is not up for negotiation or to be influenced by students, parents or anyone else.
- There may be some students whose personal circumstances mean that awarding them a grade via the process intended for the majority of students at your school or college might not lead to a fair reflection of the evidence of their performance. There is flexibility within the system laid out to allow a different approach for such students, however it is another instance of a decision that would be for education staff only – and not to be influenced by students, parents or anyone else.
- It might be that students or parents have concerns based on information about individual circumstances that you are not currently aware of and that affects whether or not the usual intended process at your centre is most appropriate for them (for example, if they missed an assessment or significant learning time due to something at home). Therefore, it would be relevant and acceptable for them to bring such information to your attention, however it would be up to you as the professionals to decide whether this affects what method is used to award them a grade fairly and objectively.
- As such, you can in exceptional circumstances use different evidence, or the same evidence in a different way, for individual students. However which students this applies to and the method used for that student would need to be spelt out on submission of a centre's grades, so that the board in question is aware.

Comparing grades to those obtained in previous years at your school or college

- Given the assessment method this year is different to a normal year it is not expected that grades will necessarily be in line with previous years.
- Despite this, Ofqual claim that data on historical learner or centre performance may help support quality assurance processes and are requiring AOs to ask schools and colleges to give a 'rationale for outcomes' if grades at a subject cohort level are out of line with those from that centre in previous years.
- Whilst overall proportions of grades from previous years may be one consideration, JCQ have said that any such comparisons with previous years' results should not determine students' grades but rather act as "one source of evidence" to help inform the judgements. In other words, the overall performance of previous

cohorts should not determine, or limit, the distribution of grades for this year's cohort.

- The key requirement, which JCQ, Ofqual and DfE agree with, is that the individual grade suggested for a student is a fair reflection of their performance based on the evidence you have rather than being based on any cohort level comparisons of overall results from previous cohorts.
- Therefore, so long as each grade for each student reflects their performance, in the way described in the guidance, and is arrived at via the process at your school or college which has been signed off by the board, then you have followed the process as required.

See this explanation from the Interim Chair of Ofqual below as to why, given the different assessment method in place this year, grades could be different to a normal year in which only or mainly exams are used:



"Imagine: I am a pretty self disciplined teacher determined to act with integrity in grading my students. In 2021 I have a class of 30 year 11 GCSE candidates, and five of them have produced work, on more than one occasion and under fairly controlled circumstances, which leads me to believe they are capable of getting a grade 9 on the day of the exam. In reality, I know, because I have been at this for a while, that all five probably won't quite manage it on the day, despite the evidence. Problem for me is: I can't be sure which of the five will, and which won't. So, acting with complete professional integrity, using the knowledge I have of normal grading standards, the range of evidence I have of their performance, and following exam board guidance, I submit a grade 9 for all five of them. That small act of professional judgement, made in perfectly good conscience, and with good evidence, available for scrutiny if requested, will inevitably have an impact when repeated across the system.

Does that render this year's qualifications less valuable? No, I don't believe it does. Because those grade 9s still tell both the holder and the user that this is a highly capable student able to operate in this subject at grade 9 level."



Appeals

- Government decided in February that they want all students to have a route to appeal. As such this guidance suggests it is possible that the evidence used to support any of the grade judgements could be required after results days (which are 10 August for AS and A-levels and 12 August for GCSEs).
- It is important to have conversations with other members and staff in your department about the way to approach this such that it will minimise workload burden and/or the necessity for all teachers to be contacted during the summer holidays.
- There may be advantages in the context of your setting to preparing this evidence in advance so that it is accessible to the relevant member of staff dealing with appeals during the holidays. This would avoid each teacher needing to be contacted during August, however it would need sufficient time within the term freed up to support this.
- Another route which may be preferable for some is to wait until after results days and only provide the evidence as necessary for those students who appeal. Whilst this would require working during August, this may be preferable for some as it avoids the potentially larger task of preparing evidence for all in advance.
- Whichever approach works best for you be sure to be having these discussions as soon as possible to ensure this is planned for. See our [guidance on planning](#) for the process for further advice on this

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[neu.org.uk](https://www.neu.org.uk)

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