

GUIDANCE

Information for centres about making objective judgements

In relation to awarding qualifications in 2021

ofqual

Contents

About this document.....	3
Making objective judgements	4
Basing decisions on evidence	4
Being aware of unconscious effects on objectivity	4
Using other evidence to identify possible bias.....	5
Reviewing judgements with others	6
Conclusion.....	6

About this document

Who this document is for

This document is for teachers who are involved in making judgements that will support qualification awarding in 2021. It is designed to help teachers make those judgements as objectively as possible, to promote fairness and minimise bias.

This document applies in cases where teacher judgements determine the final grade for a particular qualification. It also applies in cases where teacher judgements contribute to the final grade. It applies equally to judgements relating to students based at centres and those who are either home-educated or are private candidates.

How this document relates to other information

This document does not set out the specific requirements about how teacher judgements should be made, or the evidence that should be taken into account in making judgements for particular qualifications. Awarding organisations are providing guidance to centres about the approach to be taken for their qualifications. This will include requirements relating to quality assurance processes that should be put in place by centres. For further advice and information about making judgements, centres are advised to contact their awarding organisation.

For GCSEs, AS and A levels, Advanced Extension Awards and Project qualifications, Ofqual has also produced 'Information for Heads of Centre on the submission of teacher assessed grades in summer 2021'.

Context

Due to the ongoing impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, government has cancelled exams in summer 2021 for many qualifications. In many cases, teachers¹ in centres (schools and colleges) are instead being asked to make judgements to either determine, or contribute to, a student's final grade.

This document was first issued in 2020 and, following consultation, has been updated to reflect the approach being taken to assessment in 2021. It is based on existing research and analysis about how centre-based assessments can be carried out as objectively as possible.

¹ In this context the term teacher is used to encompass any member of staff at a centre who is involved in the delivery and assessment of the qualification.

Making objective judgements

Assessing students' performance objectively is crucial to determining outcomes that are as fair as possible and minimise bias. Centres are advised to make all relevant staff aware of information within this guidance.

The next sections set out what centres can do to ensure their judgements are as objective as possible, by:

- basing decisions on evidence
- being aware of unconscious effects on objectivity
- using other evidence to identify possible bias
- reviewing judgements with others

Following these steps could help a centre to assure itself that it has effectively fulfilled relevant duties to promote equality and avoid discrimination, as set out in the Equality Act 2010.

Basing decisions on evidence

Each teacher assessed grade or outcome should be a holistic professional judgement, balancing different sources of evidence. Judgements should be based on records and evidence that demonstrate a student's performance in relation to the subject content that they have been taught.

Other factors should not affect this judgement. These include characteristics protected under equalities legislation such as a student's sex, race/ethnicity, religion/belief, disability status, gender reassignment or sexual orientation. These also include factors such as social background (including culture or family), socio-economic status, or perceived English language proficiency (where this is not relevant to the knowledge, skills and understanding being assessed).

Similarly, judgements should not be affected by a student's behaviour (positive or negative), character or personality, appearance, performance of their siblings, parental opinions or the knowledge of grades needed to meet a university offer.

Being aware of unconscious effects on objectivity

Without always realising it, everyone holds unconscious beliefs about others. These can be based on things like social factors or identities of others, as detailed above. There is a risk that objective judgements can be affected by unconscious beliefs and other types of bias.

Centres are urged to reflect on and question whether any of their judgements might be affected by factors not based on evidence of performance, such as unconscious beliefs or types of bias. These factors can affect judgements of student performance and can also affect the perception of particular pieces of evidence.

Centres should be aware of:

- confirmation bias, for example noticing only evidence about a student that fits with pre-existing views about them
- halo effects, for example where a particularly positive impression of a student overly accentuates their actual knowledge, skills and abilities. Or the opposite, where negative impressions or low expectations of a student hides their actual knowledge, skills and abilities
- primacy effects, for example giving undue weight to ‘first impressions’ of a student
- recency effects, for example giving undue weight to the most recent interaction with a student
- selective perceptions, for example giving undue weight to a student’s performance on a particular piece of work
- contrast effects, for example over-estimating a student’s likely performance having first considered a large number of students who are all at a much lower standard
- exception effects, for example, under- or over-grading a student’s performance if it is significantly out of line with (above or below) other students in that centre
- conformity bias, for example, placing undue weight on the opinions of others where these are not necessarily supported by the evidence
- affinity bias, having a more favourable impression of a student’s performance because the student or their qualities/attributes are relatable or similar to one’s own qualities or attributes

This is not an exhaustive list, but is designed to raise awareness of the main biases that could negatively impact on the quality of centre judgements.

Using other evidence to identify possible bias

Other relevant sources of evidence may be available that could help to check whether there might be bias in judgements. Analysis may be useful to identify whether there may be any indications of systematic under- or over-grading (indicative of possible bias) in judgements made for different groups of students. This could relate to students with particular protected characteristics or

from different socio-economic backgrounds.

For example, by comparing UCAS predictions with exam outcomes from previous years, a centre may find that it has routinely under-estimated predicted A level maths grades compared to grades actually achieved for students with particular characteristics; or routinely over-estimated target English language GCSE grades compared to grades actually achieved for students with particular characteristics. Any evidence of possible bias can be useful in challenging and quality assuring judgements.

When considering the evidence available and possible uses, centres should also consider possible limitations. For example, significant personnel changes may mean that effects in previous years may not be assumed to carry forward. Centres will also need to be aware of the need to avoid over- or under-compensating for any effects that may be found.

Reviewing judgements with others

Dialogue with others can support effective reflection and review and help minimise bias. It can be used to check that judgements are evidence-based, to challenge any possible biases and to review any other evidence that may identify possible bias. Questions or concerns teachers may have about how to deal with possible bias can also be resolved through dialogue.

Dialogue can include reviews with and between teachers, SENCos² or other SEND experts, subject teams, Heads of Departments and Heads of Centres (and dialogue with other centres if this can be carried out in line with local public health restrictions).

In particular, consulting SENCos, or other SEND experts in quality assurance processes may help prevent possible biases or unconscious effects from affecting judgements for students with special educational needs or disabilities.

Conclusion

Centre judgements should be determined by the specific performance of each student in relation to each qualification. Following the steps outlined above can help a centre assure itself that it has maximised objectivity and avoided bias in the judgements that it has made.

² Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators, sometimes also known as SENDCos (Special Educational Needs and Disability Co-ordinators)



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