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Guidance

Guidance for centres: awarding of vocational, technical and other general qualifications in summer 2021

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About this document

We are working to the same principles, training providers and other settings as last year. This guidance covers vocational and technical (VTQ) qualifications and general qualifications other than GCSE, AS level, and A level (for other general qualifications Level 3 extended project qualifications).

In this guidance we explain the awarding of VTQs and other general qualifications this summer, and what this means for awarding organisations and what you should expect to happen over the coming weeks.

Awarding is different in summer 2021

The unprecedented nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to disruption of external assessments for some Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications. We have worked with awarding organisations and regulators to take a set of common health requirements and risk assessed employers.

We asked awarding organisations to carefully balance mitigating the effects of the pandemic with the need to provide fair and reliable results that allow learners to progress. We recognise that this year's cohort of learners have experienced disruption to their education, training and schools and colleges, and that the information they need to implement these approaches fairly and consistently. In turn, we know that this cohort of learners will be concerned about how they will be assessed and centres in developing their assessment approaches.

We know that in some cases the implementation of these arrangements is not without risk. We have worked with awarding organisations and are working with them to ensure good practice is shared and implemented.

You will know that the VTQ landscape is complex. Unlike GCSEs, AS and A levels, there is no single approach to awarding that would work for all types of learner, because of the very different qualification structures and assessment methods used.

We have put in place various arrangements to support consistency across centres and awarding organisations. We have also made it clear that we expect awarding organisations to implement appropriate approaches. However, it is inevitable that there will be some variation in approach, although where there is no difference, this will be clear.

We are working with awarding organisations to ensure that there is that support the safe delivery of their assessments. Some assessments will continue to take place while other moats will be based partly, or wholly, on teacher judgement. These arrangements are set out in the Ofqualand the Department for Education's (DfE) Plan for GCSEs, AS and A levels.

It is important that:

1. Results secure public confidence. Education providers and employers can confident this year's results will carry the same currency as previous and future years.
2. Learners receiving VTQ and other general qualification results that are not affected by coronavirus (or disadvantaged compared to learners studying for GCSEs, AS and A levels).

We expect that the majority of learners who planned to take external assessments this summer so that they could progress to either further or higher education or to enter the workforce will be able to do so. We recognise that it will not be possible for all learners who want to undertake a specific assessment this summer to receive a result – they might have to wait for the next available assessment opportunity.

For the purposes of awarding VTQs and other general qualifications, the main qualifications this year categories:

1. Qualifications that require a demonstration of occupational or professional competence.
2. Qualifications that are similar to, or delivered alongside GCSEs, AS and A levels and which are used for progression to further or higher education.
3. Other qualifications used for progression which are different from GCSEs, AS and A levels.

We have added a qualification explainer tool which enables centres and learners to easily search for qualifications and find information about how results will be determined for all Ofqual general qualifications this year.

Learners these arrangements apply to

These arrangements apply to both certificating and non-certificating learners in England, who are taking a qualification:

- qualification either is or delivered alongside GCSEs, AS and A levels
- other qualifications and the organisation which are offered alongside GCSEs, AS and A levels who were expecting to sit assessments between 1 August 2020 and 31 August 2021

These arrangements should allow, where possible, learners taking qualifications to progress to further education, training or another vocational pathway or alternative approach to awarding where appropriate.

Awarding organisations:

- must be sure that the only issue results to learners who were intending to sit assessments this year
- will need to work with centres to verify those learners
- may choose to issue results under these arrangements for learners who are due to be assessed in subsequent assessment windows

If you have learners taking qualifications nationally, please contact your awarding organisation for further information.

Qualifications that require a demonstration of occupation or professional competence or proficiency

For some qualifications, such as those that assess occupational competency, professional competency, or are a licence to practice, it would not be right to award these qualifications without the necessary skills and knowledge having been formally tested. We know that this is a concern for learners who need to be able to demonstrate competence in order to progress in employment or education. We also know that there are some qualifications where it is not possible to make a judgement about the extent to which the qualification relates or does not meet the standards set by professional bodies. We know that this is a concern for learners who need to be able to show these qualifications based on assessment evidence from usual centre-based assessments.

We have asked awarding organisations to carefully consider adaptations to assessments, enabling as many learners as possible to obtain a result, without compromising the integrity of the qualification. We have also asked for the implications of the adaptations that were put in place last year because of the pandemic to be reviewed, the qualifications you are delivering. Additionally, awarding organisations may choose to make changes to the way in which they assess, or to the content of assessments, and these may be alternative but to want until the assessment can be held.

If a learner is unable to take an assessment for reasons outside their control, their awarding organisation may be able to apply Special Consideration. Please speak to your awarding organisation for further information.

Qualifications that are similar to, or delivered alongside GCSEs, AS and A levels, and which are used for progression to further or higher education

For these qualifications, we expect awarding organisations to use similar approaches to those used in the awarding of GCSE, AS and A levels where possible and appropriate, using teacher-assessed grades. Examples of these qualifications are:

- Applied Generals, Technical Awards and Tech Levels
- Other qualifications used in school and college performance measures
- Core Maths

These qualifications vary in their size, assessment structures, grading structures and delivery models, and learners taking these qualifications may have completed different amounts of work and assessment. This means that awarding organisations may have to adapt their approaches to determining results that are similar to those used for GCSEs and other qualifications.

We are working with awarding organisations to ensure that there is as much consistency in their approach as possible, despite these variations.

The overall approach to awarding will be the similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels. In that awarding organisations will be expected to use a range of evidence to determine grades. For example, some awarding organisations may require completed or partially completed assessed grades instead of qualification level assessments, but they will also have opportunities differences because VTQs have different ways of working with their centres.

Evidence to support teacher-assessed grades

Teacher-assessed grades (also called TAGs) will be based on evidence of a learner's achievement, with teachers drawing on a range of different types of appropriate evidence to make a judgement about the grade a learner should receive. The evidence used may vary depending on the qualification, awarding organisation and centre, but the evidence that is available to them and developed the most appropriate approach for their learners. We have asked awarding organisations to provide clear guidance on evidence and process that should be used to determine teacher-assessed grades.

The evidence considered by a centre may include the following:

1. Performance in any assessment for the qualification which has not been fully completed. Where relevant, an awarding organisation should encourage you to use this evidence, for example, if you have completed mock assessments or, as grades, and for you to mark those assessments.
2. Performance on any class or homework assessments and mock exams taken over the course of study.
3. Records of the learner's performance over the course of study in relation to the qualification. This may include progress review data, coursework, and participation in practical or other assessment activities.
4. Any other relevant evidence.

The Department for Education is clear that teaching and learning should continue for as long as possible, and cover as much of the qualification content as possible. This will help equip learners as fully as possible for their future employment and educational pathways. We know that some learners will have had their education and training and assessing work, and providing feedback to learners on work completed and receiving this insight form part of the evidence for a teacher-assessed grade. You are encouraged to use evidence of this type, but we know that it will not be available for all learners or qualifications you may have undertaken that can not be completed.

For qualifications which include some occupational elements, awarding organisations will be expected to use simulated assessments that have been developed to ensure the safe award of the qualification.

If you do not have sufficient evidence upon which to base a teacher-assessed grade for a given learner, then please get in touch with your awarding organisation. If it is not possible to find additional evidence, it will not be possible to issue a result and the learner will have to wait until the next available assessment opportunity.

Learners who sat or expected to sit exams in January 2021

For those qualifications that are GCSE, AS and A levels, assessments will be also in progress, irrespective of whether they sat an exam in January.

We want to ensure fairness for learners who sat or who expected to sit exams in January, certificating learners and learners who participated in the January assessment. We have asked awarding organisations to:

1. Learners who were absent from January assessments will be able to receive a result based on a teacher-assessed or alternative approach to awarding.
2. Learners who sat the examinations, but found that the disruption caused by the pandemic affected their ability to show what they know and can do in the assessment, will be able to receive a result based on a teacher-assessed grade or other approach to awarding.

Please contact your awarding organisation for further guidance on their approach to issuing results to learners who took or were expecting to take assessments in January 2021.

Other qualifications used for progression which are different from GCSEs or A levels

For these qualifications we expect awarding organisations to make assess and informal assessments to determine grades.

Examples of these qualifications are:

- Functional Skills
- English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Skills for life qualifications
- Essential Digital Skills qualifications

Functional Skills qualifications

Awarding organisations have put in place a range of approaches to give learners an equal opportunity to possible to take assessments. The table below shows the range of assessment options offered for Functional Skills offered by each awarding organisation. Learners should contact their awarding organisation for more information on what is available. Further details for functional skills qualifications are found on our website.

Awarding organisation	Remote invigilated	On-screen at computer based	Paper based	Awarding organisation provided test centre
AQA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CWA	On request to the awarding organisation	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation
City & Guilds	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation	On request to the awarding organisation
FBU	Yes	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation
Highfield	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NCFE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NOCN	Yes	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation
OCR	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open Awards	Yes	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation
Pearson	On request to the awarding organisation	Yes	Yes	Yes
SQA(NI)	Yes	Yes	On request to the awarding organisation	Yes

Retaining evidence of teacher-assessed grades

You are required to keep all evidence used in the determination of a teacher-assessed grade until 6 months after the results issue date, or the conclusion of any appeal in relation to that result, whichever is later.

Objective judgements of teacher-assessed grades

Awarding organisations must ensure that you have objective judgements in place for your learners. Awarding organisations must also take steps to ensure that teacher assessed grade is based on the centre's judgement as to learners' actual level of attainment against the standard of the qualification, and not on factors unrelated to assessed the rigour of delivery of assessments, which can be found on our website.

Quality assurance of teacher-assessed grades

A centre's and awarding organisation's quality assurance processes are both important parts of the assessing process because they ensure that there is a common sense of the judgements being made by different teachers in different subjects or in different centres, and that the judgements are fair and reliable. Awarding organisations will provide a quality assurance process that they will operate. They will also provide guidance to centres on how to carry out internal quality assurance.

Your awarding organisation will require your centre to have a clear approach for carrying out internal quality assurance of your teacher-assessed grades before these are submitted to your awarding organisation. Your awarding organisation will provide you with a process and guidance on this as part of their quality assurance processes. Your centre should be able to show how it has carried out its internal quality assurance, expect you to complete and return a 'head of centre declaration' when you submit your grades to your awarding organisation. You will have completed all the required assurance arrangements.

Your quality assurance approach should include a check of grades against previous cohorts of the centre and look for assessment for the same qualification in previous years. You know the level at which your students are working and how their compares to previous students, and your awarding organisation will provide you with this knowledge and the supporting data to check that the grades you submit reflects the evidence that underpins them.

Your teacher-assessed grades should be reviewed by other subject teachers and assessors as well as the relevant head of department or head of centre before submission. The aim is to ensure fairness.

What this means for you

Your awarding organisation will provide guidance on:

- the range of evidence that could be considered in the judgement of a teacher-assessed grade
- how to make a judgement when determining teacher-assessed grades
- ensuring decisions are consistent
- internal quality assurance requirements
- the application of reasonable adjustments and special consideration

Guidance from awarding organisations could take the form of exemplification materials or other materials to support you when evaluating the evidence for teacher-assessed grades.

Your awarding organisation may ask for additional information from you to assist with their quality assurance. This may include:

- when learners are expecting to take assessments and receive certification, so the correct learners are issued with results
- details of your approach to internal quality assurance
- your completed head of centre declaration
- samples of the evidence and teacher-assessed grades are based

Your awarding organisation will not issue a result until any issues identified as part of its quality assurance processes have been resolved satisfactorily.

Apprenticeship end-point assessments

The Institute for the Government of apprenticeships and traineeships has set the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education. They have published more details and guidance about apprenticeships.

Preventing errors and unfair advantage

Some of our rules for how we carry out our regulatory responsibilities further disruption this year. We want to be sure that we can rely on the results of assessments and we expect them to do all they can to prevent errors and to put things right as quickly as possible. We have asked awarding organisations to remain vigilant to the risk of malpractice.

We expect every effort to be taken to prevent any learner gaining an unfair advantage through these arrangements and we expect awarding organisations to put in place an effective way to prevent malpractice and to investigate and address any suspected malpractice. We expect that any learner who is found to have gained an advantage to promptly report any incidents to Ofqual and we will monitor their response.

Cyber-security

Many qualifications will be awarded through teacher-assessed grades this year and any cyber-attacks could have a greater impact than usual.

We know attacks in previous years have prevented centres from accessing student work. This year a cyber-attack could result in centres being unable to access student work and evidence, or being unable to make assessments. We have asked awarding organisations to take extra precautions to ensure awarding organisations, centres and students receiving their results on time.

We have also asked awarding organisations to be aware of this risk and target advice and guidance to centres on supporting teaching and data and making sure critical and anti-ransomware systems are up to date.

If you need further information, the National Cyber Security Centre has a range of practical advice and resources on improving cyber security in centres.

Results

Most results will continue to be issued by normal timescales. Where VTQ results are issued through assessment windows, results will be issued as soon as possible. Learners should be issued results later than 20 GCSE or 20 August 2021 and results for level 3 qualifications should be issued no later than AS and A-level results on 10 August 2021. We know that a learner who is hoping to progress onto further or higher education is disappointed.

What this means for you

1. Your awarding organisations will confirm their results days.
2. The results of on-demand qualifications will continue be awarded in line with current practice.
3. You should receive results data in good time to allow you to prepare for the distribution of results on the correct days.
4. We have asked awarding organisations to manage and resources available at your centre who can respond to queries from learners, and the awarding organisation if necessary, and keep prepared for the distribution of results.

Appeals

Appeals procedures put in place by awarding organisations may be different this year, to reflect the assessments of these arrangements.

Where results for a qualification will be awarded based on teacher-assessed grades, the only ground for appeal will be that the result is not in line with the assessment. This means that a learner could appeal on the basis that:

- the centre did not follow its procedure properly and consistently in arriving at the learner's result (including failure of quality assurance) or in conducting the appeal
- the result reflects an unreasonable exercise of academic judgement on the part of the centre
- the result reflects an unreasonable or administrative error in relation to the learner

While the appeals approach for these qualifications is expected to be available on the same basis as GCSEs and A levels, the process will be expected to be different to take into account the different awarding organisations. In most cases centres will conduct the initial stage of the appeal process, and then the second stage will be conducted by the awarding organisation. Awarding organisations will provide more information on the detail of the appeals approach that will apply for their qualifications where appropriate, and will publish this on their websites.

The qualifications not being awarded on the basis of teacher-assessed grades, and appeals arrangements are likely to apply. If you remain dissatisfied following the appeals process, you can contact to raise a complaint.

Additional assessment opportunities

We are requiring awarding organisations who normally provide assessment opportunities between September and January, to make those assessments available to learners who need to sit them, and to provide results to learners who sat the assessments. Where possible, as well as for those who unfortunately were absent or unwell at the time.

Where awarding organisations do not normally provide assessment opportunities between September and January, they will need to make arrangements for assessments where they reasonably consider that it is necessary to do so, and in consultation with both the awarding organisation and centres.

We expect awarding organisations to work with centres, and to take decisions in the best interests of learners. We recognise that we decide there is a particular need for an assessment that is not being held by awarding organisations.

What this means for you

You should contact your awarding organisation in the first instance to find out their approach to additional assessment opportunities.

Key dates

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Key dates

> You should refer to your awarding organisation for detailed timelines and submission dates for teacher-assessed grades for VTQ and other general qualifications.

18 June 2021

Deadline for the submission of teacher-assessed grades for GCSEs, AS and A levels. Some VTQ awarding organisations are also setting this as the date for the submission of teacher-assessed grades.

10 August 2021

Results day for A levels and some level 3 VTQs.

12 August 2021

Results day for GCSEs and some level 2 VTQs.

Closure of the Extraordinary Regulatory Framework (ERF) and the Extended Extraordinary Framework (Extended ERF)

We have closed the frameworks that have operated since March 2020, but learners who received calculated results last year (or who have deferred calculated results) will still be able to carry them forward into their qualification result this summer and beyond.

Any appeals that are ongoing under these frameworks can also be continued. Awarding organisations are now operating under the Vocational and Technical Qualifications Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF).

For further details, please see the results of our consultation, 'Regulatory arrangements for the awarding of vocational and technical and other general qualifications in 2020 to 2021'.

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