



Research and analysis

Delivery and award of vocational and technical qualifications in 2021

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Contents

[Background](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Phases of delivery](#)

[Conclusion and next steps](#)

 [Print this page](#)

Background

This report covers all qualifications (except for GCSE, AS, A level, Project, AEA qualifications and apprenticeship end-point assessments) awarded between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021 (the academic year 2020 to 2021). During the period covered by this report, Ofqual regulated approximately 174 awarding organisations offering over 17,000 regulated vocational, technical and other general qualifications.

These qualifications are taken in colleges, schools and training providers or via employers. They cover a wide variety of subjects or sectors and could be assessed through timetabled assessments, on demand assessments, centre-set or marked tasks, practical activities, the production of portfolios or through a combination of these.

Some of these qualifications are taken instead of, or alongside, GCSEs, AS and

A levels. Others, such as Functional Skills qualifications and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), are similarly used for progression to further or higher education or progression to employment, but are unlike GCSEs, AS and A levels in their size, delivery and structure. Many more vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) test occupational competency or are used as a licence to practise.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led to disrupted education and training for many students. Public health restrictions continued to be in place during 2020 and 2021, and further disruption occurred on a localised basis, which affected teaching and learning and the delivery of assessments. Initially, the government's expectation was that assessments should take place in the academic year 2020 to 2021 because that is the fairest way of providing results for students. On this basis, awarding organisations began to consider and put in place adaptations to qualifications to enable assessments to take place in 2021.

In January 2021, the government announced that GCSE, AS and A level exams would not go ahead in the summer because of the disruption to students' education caused by the pandemic. Likewise, it was the government's policy position that it was not viable for timetabled exams and assessments for many vocational, technical and other general qualifications to take place. Some students were also not able to complete other forms of assessment because of the disruption arising from the pandemic.

Ofqual worked at pace with the Department for Education to launch [a joint consultation](#) on the alternative awarding arrangements. Then, following a [further consultation](#), Ofqual put in place the Vocational Contingency Regulatory Framework (the VCRF), a principles driven framework that gave awarding organisations the flexibility to successfully award hundreds of thousands of VTQ certificates during 2021.

The VCRF applied to all qualifications from Entry level to Level 6, except for GCSE, AS, and A level qualifications, AEA, Project qualifications and apprenticeship end-point assessments. It permitted awarding organisations to adapt qualifications and assessments, or to issue results using alternative arrangements, for example, based on teacher-assessed grades (TAGs).

The VCRF set out broad categories of qualifications to enable awarding organisations to award results to students who needed to progress to the next stage of their lives, without undermining the validity and reliability of their qualifications.

Category A included qualifications which assess occupational or professional competency, proficiency, or act as a licence to practise, as well as performing arts graded examinations which assess proficiency. Exams and assessments needed to continue either in normal or adapted form to allow students to be awarded these qualifications.

Category B included qualifications that are important for progression to further or higher study or into employment where the issuing of results to students should

be prioritised.

Within Category B we distinguished between:

- qualifications most similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels used for progression to further or higher education – these qualifications were awarded using alternative arrangements, such as TAGs
- qualifications used to support progression to further or higher study, but which do not have the same characteristics as GCSEs, AS and A levels and are not delivered in the same way – the exams and assessments were expected to continue either in normal or adapted form, but where students were ready to take an assessment but could not do so safely, results could be issued using alternative arrangements including TAGs.

Introduction

This report describes the steps Ofqual, awarding organisations and a range of other stakeholders took to ensure the effective delivery and award of qualifications in the academic year 2020 to 2021.

Individual awarding organisations remained responsible for managing, and reporting to Ofqual, any issues that arose in the delivery and award of their qualifications. As the regulator, we monitor the actions awarding organisations take and intervene where it is necessary to protect standards, public confidence, or to mitigate any impact on students.

We monitor awarding organisations' management of any incidents and, after results are published, we evaluate the cause of each incident, its impact and how effectively it was managed. We decide if any regulatory response is necessary. We follow up specific incidents with individual awarding organisations, consider the focus of our ongoing monitoring and, where appropriate, conduct additional work to understand how to minimise the likelihood of particular types of issue from reoccurring.

From October 2020 to September 2021 (please see our [vocational qualifications dataset](#)), awarding organisations issued a total of 4.6 million certificates, which is a 9% percent increase on the 4.2 million certificates issued in October 2019 to September 2020. As an illustration, in spring and summer 2021 alone, awarding organisations worked closely with centres to issue over 1 million qualification results to students taking Functional Skills qualifications, other general qualifications such as Core Maths, IB Diplomas and Cambridge Pre-Us, and VTQs approved for inclusion in the Department for Education's performance tables such as Applied Generals and Tech Levels.

This was a significant achievement by awarding organisations and centres. Awarding organisations swiftly introduced new or additional measures to mitigate the disruption caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to teaching,

learning, and delivery of assessments, to issue sufficiently valid and reliable results to enable student progression, and to provide appropriate support, guidance and information to centres. Teachers, centre leaders, and support staff took on the difficult and important task in assessing students' performance to determine their grades where TAGs were used, in conducting and/or adapting assessments where they needed to go ahead, and in continuing to mark students' work so that results could be generated. This was on top of the other pandemic-related pressures throughout the year.

Ofqual provided oversight of the activities across the system, seeking to ensure the effectiveness of communications, and providing support and challenge where needed. We thank awarding organisations and teachers, centre leaders and support staff for all their work this year to ensure that students received the grades that reflected their achievements.

Phases of delivery

This year many awarding organisations had to adapt their approaches in a number of ways to safely deliver results. The approaches they took, either where they delivered assessments or issued results on the basis of TAGs, can be described in four broad ways: planning, delivery, quality assurance and results, and post-results. We have structured this report to reflect these.

Phase 1: planning

Ofqual did not prescribe a single approach for awarding organisations to deliver or award their qualifications. This was due to the different purpose, size, structures, assessment types and levels of VTQs.

For those qualifications whose characteristics are most similar to GCSE, AS and A levels, we expected awarding organisations to use similar approaches to awarding. This meant that these qualifications were most likely awarded using alternative approaches such as TAGs.

Some VTQs which are important for progression to further or higher study or to employment also include some assessment of occupational skills and those needed to continue. We expected awarding organisations to use similar approaches to those used for GCSE, AS and A levels where that was possible for the elements of the qualification which do not assess occupational skills.

Many VTQs are modular – they are taught and assessed as separate units or components – and we recognised and permitted that TAGs could be determined for each unit rather than the overall qualification where this was appropriate.

For those qualifications which are important for progression to further study or employment, but which do not share all the same key characteristics as GCSE, AS and A levels, such as Functional Skills qualifications, we expected awarding organisations to make live assessments available. They could, in parallel, issue results using TAGs for students who could not safely access those live assessments.

Ofqual's role was to monitor awarding organisations' delivery of assessments and issuing of results was in line with the VCRF. We required awarding organisations to manage any risks that could undermine the validity of those assessments and results. We monitored that awarding organisations':

- approaches were consistent, where it was necessary for them to be, including that they assigned their qualifications to the most appropriate qualification category
- approaches to issuing results were sufficiently valid and reliable, depending on which category their qualifications fell into
- implementation of any additional systems and processes for alternative delivery or awarding arrangements were done swiftly and efficiently
- communications to their centres were clear and that these centres understood the relevant policy context, decisions, and processes

If an awarding organisation did not manage those risks effectively, Ofqual could issue a Technical Advice Notice. Awarding organisations had to have regard to this advice and had to explain to Ofqual what it had done to comply with the notice.

Driving consistency

Ofqual required all awarding organisations to tell us how they categorised every qualification they offered that was covered by the VCRF. We checked their categorisations to ensure that they had placed their qualifications in the most appropriate category and that their approach would be consistent with similar qualifications they, or other awarding organisations, offered.

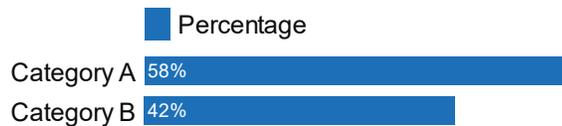
We found that many awarding organisations understood our requirements, and where we found issues, these related to a small subset of the relevant awarding organisations' qualifications offer. Our checks led to a change of categorisation to approximately 540 qualifications out of over 17,000 qualifications covered by the VCRF. This intervention helped place some awarding organisations on the right trajectory to deliver and award their qualifications in the most appropriate and consistent manner.

VCRF qualifications by categories

[Change to table and accessible view](#)



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We also published an interactive [qualification explainer tool](#), which teachers, students, parents and other stakeholders could use to see how a specific qualification would be assessed and awarded in the period up to 31 August 2021.

Our framework set out, in guidance, an expectation that awarding organisations should, where possible, work with other awarding organisations and within their sector, industry or qualification type (for example Functional Skills qualifications) to decide if a common approach to awarding qualifications could be achieved. Where a common approach was agreed, awarding organisations should seek to comply with it where possible and appropriate.

Throughout the year, we met with groups of awarding organisations at weekly or fortnightly oversight board, policy board and/or technical working group meetings to discuss policy development and implementation. In addition, we held at least 20 webinars and workshops with groups of awarding organisations to promote consistency in their approaches to adaptation, sources of information in determining results, internal and external quality assurance approaches, appeals and working with centres and students. Many awarding organisations also benefited from the support of the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) and the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB), who facilitated a range of working groups including those with sector-specific focus to help those offering similar qualifications to agree and adopt consistent approaches.

Appropriate approaches to issuing results

Through the VCRF we gave awarding organisations the flexibility to design and apply an approach to issuing results that worked for them and their qualifications, provided that they met the principles and requirements we set out. We gave detailed guidance on the thought processes we would expect an awarding organisation to work through when considering their approaches.

We required all awarding organisations to maintain a record of their decisions and rationales related to the adaptation and/or alternative awarding of their qualifications and assessments. We reviewed the decision records for 767 qualifications offered by 25 awarding organisations. This review focussed on Category B qualifications, which could be awarded using TAGs, because of the novel nature of alternative arrangements and the speed with which awarding organisations needed to devise new systems or processes. These qualifications accounted for over a quarter of all VTQ certifications between October 2020 and September 2021, and included all Functional Skills qualifications, all technical

qualifications that are approved for inclusion in the Department for Education's performance tables, and other general qualifications such as Core Maths, IBO's Diploma and Cambridge International's Pre-U.

Awarding organisations set out how they intended to adapt and/or award their qualifications, how their approach would meet the principles of the VCRF, and how they planned to issue communications and guidance to their centres. Some qualifications, such as Functional Skills, had common content and followed the same qualification-level and subject-level regulatory requirements. This made it possible for awarding organisations offering these qualifications to agree a common approach upfront so that their arrangements to deliver and award qualifications were consistent, which were reflected in their decision records.

Where we had concerns or needed further information, we requested more details about, for example, how they had balanced our VCRF principles when designing their approach, or how they had ensured there would be no advantage or disadvantage for students taking VTQs similar to GCSE, AS and A levels compared to their peers. Awarding organisations were not always clear about how they planned to issue component or unit results to students who were part way through their course. Some awarding organisations also provided insufficient details about how they had considered equalities issues when designing their approach.

We provided specific feedback to individual awarding organisations, and general feedback, to all awarding organisations where it was relevant. After our review of each decision record, we required the awarding organisation to give additional clarity or to resubmit its decision record where necessary. In one case, we issued a Technical Advice Notice to the awarding organisation to ensure that its approach complied with our requirements.

By doing this, we helped improve the quality and consistency in awarding organisations' decisions and contributed to the safe delivery of valid awards and fairness to students.

Awarding organisation readiness

Awarding organisations needed to act quickly to implement all aspects of their intended approaches while keeping their centres fully informed of the decisions and processes that affected them.

Ofqual carried out checks on awarding organisations to ensure that they had appropriate plans, resource, and expertise to identify, prevent or mitigate any risks that could affect qualification delivery. We assessed all awarding organisations' financial stability throughout the year, and we undertook readiness reviews of 17 awarding organisations that hold over 60 percent of the VTQ market share between them. The readiness reviews took place between April and May and were semi-structured interviews during which we explored:

- awarding organisations' governance and capacity
- their management of a range of operational risks relating to the delivery of all

qualifications such as malpractice

- their management of risks relating to specific qualifications such as quality assurance of TAG submissions for Category B qualifications

Awarding organisations demonstrated that they had already carried out much preparation to set up new systems and processes and had put in place appropriate controls to manage the risks involved. We did however identify some issues within awarding organisations' delivery plans, such as the approach to remote invigilation and grounds on which appeals could be made. Following the readiness reviews, we provided feedback to 8 awarding organisations and asked them to strengthen their controls.

As a result, we enabled awarding organisations to be more proactive in preventing those risks that could undermine the safe delivery and award of results.

Phase 2: delivery

Ofqual deliberately front-loaded our monitoring activities at the planning phase so that we could help awarding organisations and centres prevent risks, instead of having to deal with issues that may adversely affect students. However, we recognise that it is not always possible to eliminate all risks upfront.

Through our ongoing engagement with stakeholders, other regulators and government departments we actively scanned for emerging risks and issues. We highlighted any risks to awarding organisations and made sure that they managed them effectively and quickly to minimise any negative impact on students. We monitored awarding organisations' responses to potential issues by collecting and reviewing their data, meeting with them to review individual progress, and convening working groups to resolve issues collectively.

January 2021 assessments

The government initially intended for assessments to take place in the academic year 2020 and 2021. In January, the public health situation began to worsen but government's position was that students should be supported to take assessments, in January, where it was safe and if they were ready to do so, so that they could demonstrate the knowledge and skills they had acquired.

Ofqual asked awarding organisations to contact their centres to make it clear that assessments remained available during January, that students may be able to take assessments at a later date, and that in the event that was not possible, arrangements would be put in place to ensure they were not disadvantaged.

We collected information about student attendance from the 6 largest VTQ awarding organisations offering January assessments. All awarding organisations reported an increase in the number of scheduled students not taking exams when compared to previous years. Whereas the absence rate in January 2020 was 6 to 7 per cent, it had risen to between 30 to 65 per cent in January 2021.

For those qualifications most like GCSEs, AS and A levels, to ensure that there is

parity for students who sat or who expected to sit exams in January, we put in place arrangements that enabled students who were absent from January examinations to receive a result based on a TAG. We also allowed students who did sit the exams but found that having to take those assessments in the context of the disruption caused by the pandemic in January adversely affected their ability to demonstrate their attainment, to receive a result based on a TAG.

Awarding organisations' issue management

Ofqual requires awarding organisations, in any year, to promptly notify us where they have cause to believe that an event has occurred, or is likely to occur, which could have an adverse effect ([General Condition B3](#)). We define an act, omission, event, incident, or circumstance to have an adverse effect if it –

- (a) gives rise to prejudice to Learners or potential Learners, or
- (b) adversely affects –
 - (i) the ability of the awarding organisation to undertake the development, delivery or award of qualifications in a way that complies with its Conditions of Recognition,
 - (ii) the standards of qualifications which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, or
 - (iii) public confidence in qualifications.

We routinely analyse event notifications to assess the impact of the issues that gave rise to them and to evaluate awarding organisations' management of those events. This determines not only whether we need to take any formal action, but also feeds into our ongoing monitoring of awarding organisations.

During the academic year 2020 to 2021, we received 457 event notifications from 83 awarding organisations, compared to 539 event notifications from 98 awarding organisations in the year before. A breakdown of the main event types from the 2020 to 2021 academic year can be seen here:

Event notification by type

[Change to table and accessible view](#)



- assessment material errors refer to suspected or actual errors in questions or tasks that could affect a student's ability to generate a meaningful response
- delivery failures refer to issues in the process of delivering an assessment or handling of data that could have an impact on the accuracy or the timely release of results
- incorrect results refer to inaccuracies in the results released by awarding organisations
- incorrect certificates refer to inaccuracies in the certificates issued by awarding organisations
- malpractice or maladministration refers to alleged instances of malpractice (arising from wrongdoing or unethical behaviour) or maladministration (arising from error or inattentiveness) in the development or conduct of assessments, or in the generation and/or authentication of student evidence. Not all allegations of malpractice or maladministration are reported or substantiated after investigation
- marking issues refer to issues that could have an impact on the accuracy or timely completion of marking
- security breaches refer to a loss or theft of, or breach in confidentiality in, any assessment materials or information relating to a student's grade prior to results release
- the 'Other' category incorporates events that do not fall in the above categories. Examples include brand misuse by parties misrepresenting an awarding organisation's intellectual property rights, and overseas authorities not permitting assessments to take place internationally due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

The 2 most common types of reported event were about alleged or suspected malpractice (102 events), and delivery failures (96 events).

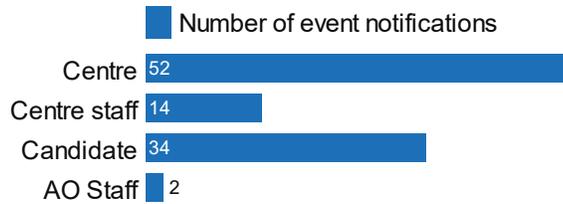
Malpractice and maladministration

Everyone involved in the delivery of qualifications has a role to play in preventing and reporting malpractice, whether they are teachers, students or assessors. Examples of malpractice or maladministration could include fraud, student plagiarism, inappropriate assistance from a teacher during an assessment or failure to follow rules when conducting assessments.

Ofqual requires awarding organisations to have appropriate measures to prevent and deal with any instances of malpractice or maladministration. Awarding organisations must investigate all allegations of malpractice or maladministration. Where it is proven, they should take proportionate action against those responsible. We expect awarding organisations to tell us where they believe there has been an incident of malpractice or maladministration which could invalidate an award or affect another awarding organisation.

Number of malpractice event notifications by their sub types

[Change to table and accessible view](#)



The chart above shows the number of malpractice or maladministration event notifications broken down by alleged sources. Allegations of malpractice or maladministration involving centres and individual centre staff were reported the most by awarding organisations. Although awarding organisations dealt with some potentially serious malpractice issues, they were isolated to specific centres or individuals, and did not undermine the overall integrity of the award of any VTQs. In some cases, awarding organisations and centres worked together effectively to mitigate the impact of any proven malpractice or maladministration.

For example, a member of the public made allegations to an awarding organisation concerning staff misconduct at an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) test centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The awarding organisation investigated and concluded that 34 students' results had been fraudulently manipulated by staff working at this test centre. The awarding organisation cancelled these results. Two ex-members of staff at this test centre - who had been suspended at the outset of the investigation - were then dismissed.

The awarding organisation's regional head office in Saudi Arabia took over the direct management of the test centre and put in place extra steps to monitor the security of testing in this region, including conducting further pre-release statistical checks on test scores, to mitigate the risk of recurrence.

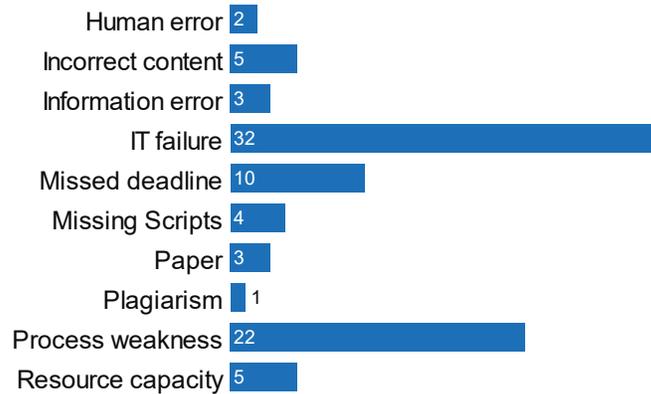
Delivery failures

Awarding organisations are required to ensure that their assessments are delivered effectively, efficiently and to set timescales. Delivery in this context includes a range of processes from printing and dispatch of question papers to issuing results and processing appeals. Awarding organisations are required to report any delivery issue which could impact the validity of the assessment result or delay the issue of results.

Number of delivery failure event notifications by their sub types

[Change to table and accessible view](#)





The chart above shows the number of delivery failure event notifications broken down reason. IT failures were the most frequent types of delivery problems reported to us by awarding organisations. They can occur at any time and cause issues for awarding organisations ranging from minor inconveniences to critical business failures. Most of the time, IT failures are out of the awarding organisation's control, but we expect them to have effective mitigations and contingency plans so that the effect of any disruption is minimised.

None of the event notifications about IT failure we received were substantial enough to threaten the ongoing operation of awarding organisations. For example, one awarding organisation reported that it experienced a temporary IT system outage. It was able to use its systems locally, but unable to send or receive information through its qualification management system to its centres. This could have caused delays to administering centre qualification claims and to responding to centre queries. To mitigate any adverse effects the awarding organisation quickly employed its business contingency policy and informed its centres by telephone and email of the outage and the revised methods of conducting business. Ofqual ensured that it received updates on the awarding organisation's progress to deploy a fix and details of the contingency plan which ensured all processes continued. This minimised the possibility of adverse effects on students.

Monitoring trends and progress

From our analysis of event notifications, we saw that several awarding organisations were experiencing issues with third-party IT platforms used to deliver online assessments, to remotely invigilate students or to carry out marking. These issues involved common suppliers. This suggested a potential capacity issue with some third-party suppliers perhaps as a result of rising demand for their services. We wrote to all awarding organisations in June to remind them to monitor for issues with the supply of these essential services, to review their contracts and to have contingency plans in place so that they could continue to deliver and award their qualifications and thus enable students to progress.

We also noted an increase in event notifications of cyber-attacks on centres that offered GCSEs, AS and A levels, as well as VTQs. We monitored these cases closely as this could compromise centres' ability to register students for

assessments or to submit results or supporting evidence for TAGs. The awarding organisations put in place alternative arrangements to ensure centres that had been impacted by cyber-attacks were able to provide and receive information, and they granted additional flexibility on deadlines for centres who temporarily lost access to data. We wrote to all awarding organisations in July to clarify our expectations for reporting this type of event and to remind them of the need to establish contingency plans with their centres in the event of an attack. We also hosted a webinar with the National Cyber Security Centre to signpost awarding organisations to further guidance and tips to manage cyber-security risks.

Teacher-assessed grades

In his [direction to Ofqual following the cancellation of exams](#), the Secretary of State outlined government policy that, for those qualifications most similar to GCSEs, AS and A levels that are used for progression to further or higher education, teachers should decide on the grade that best reflected their students' performance in assessments on the content they had been taught.

Awarding organisations provided guidance to schools, colleges and training providers about how to assess their students. Awarding organisations also set out what evidence could be used to support TAGs. This could include the following:

- performance on any assessment for the qualification even if this has not been fully completed. Where relevant, an awarding organisation should encourage its centres to support students to complete internal and non-exam assessments as far as possible, and for centres to mark those assessments
- performance on any class or homework assessments and mock exams taken over the course of study
- records of the student's performance over the course of study in the relevant qualification, which may include progress review data, classwork, and participation in practical activities, demonstrations and performances
- any other relevant evidence

Ofqual held weekly or fortnightly meetings, between May and September, with the senior leaders of the 6 awarding organisations with the highest volume of VTQ certificating students to discuss their collection and quality assurance of TAG submissions, and any emerging concerns. We also collected and reviewed fortnightly data from these awarding organisations to check their progress. This meant that we could identify potential issues as early as possible and ask awarding organisations to investigate or to resolve them quickly. For example, we saw from the TAG progress data that one awarding organisation had received a much lower percentage of expected TAG submissions (63%) compared to others (92%), even though the June deadline for submissions had passed by a week. This could have prevented the awarding organisation from processing TAGs and releasing results in a timely way. We closely monitored how the awarding organisation mitigated the issue until we were satisfied that it had managed the risks appropriately through the creation of a task force to target communication and follow-up activities at those centres that had not met the submission deadline. As a result, the expected TAG submissions were all accounted for and the

awarding organisation processed, quality assured and released results for its Level 2 and Level 3 results as planned.

We required 8 awarding organisations to strengthen their policies, processes or guidance to centres following our readiness reviews. They each provided further information about this. We needed additional assurance in some areas from 4 awarding organisations and so we conducted a formal progress review with them in July to check that they had done this to our satisfaction. For example, we had asked one awarding organisation to develop more detailed guidance to its centres about internal quality assurance of TAGs to ensure integrity and consistency of results. During the progress review, we gained assurance from the awarding organisation in terms of how it had developed the guidance and introduced it to centres through its one-to-one external quality assurance engagements.

Functional Skills qualifications

Throughout the year, we worked closely with organisations representing schools, colleges, and private training providers such as the Association of Education and Learning Providers (AELP) and the Association of Schools and Colleges (AoC) to keep them informed, to seek their input and to gather feedback from their members about our regulatory policies and awarding organisations' arrangements with centres. In addition, we established our first centre reference group in June, so that we could hear about experiences of centres and their students directly and address any concerns they had.

One of the concerns we responded to from centres and their representative groups was about the policy position taken for qualifications such as Functional Skills. Following consultation, government decided that students on these qualifications needed to take assessments where possible to be awarded a result. Some centres and teachers felt that this placed Functional Skills students at a disadvantage compared to those taking GCSEs who also followed a full-time course but who would be issued a result based on TAGs to take account of the disruption in learning. We also heard that apprentices working in some sectors such as health and social care continued to have difficulties in accessing Functional Skills assessments due to workplace restrictions.

Ofqual had been working with awarding organisations and other government agencies such as the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education since September 2020 to ensure there was sufficient access to Functional Skills assessments for most students and apprentices. The ESFA temporarily suspended the requirement that Level 2 apprentices must attempt Level 2 Functional skills assessments before they pass through gateway to sit their end-point assessments (EPAs) until December 2021.

Ofqual closely monitored awarding organisations' introduction of a range of adaptations so that assessments could continue. Where the students and apprentices faced barriers to taking Functional Skills assessments, such as where their centres were unable to provide suitable venues to deliver tests, we required

the awarding organisations to take all steps within their power to remove those barriers. Awarding organisations took a range of steps, such as extending windows during which a student could take an assessment, changing invigilation requirements so that students could be invigilated by their own tutors or employers if necessary, and hiring office venues as alternative sites for centres to deliver assessments.

Ofqual also monitored awarding organisations to ensure that they each made good progress to roll out their remote invigilation solution, where they had chosen to introduce it. Remote invigilation is where the student is observed or supervised by an invigilator while they complete an assessment, which is usually taken online. Many awarding organisations took this innovative step so that students and apprentices were able to take assessments outside of an approved centre, such as at their own home or at an employer's premises. Where awarding organisations did not make substantial progress, we sought further details and assurances from them that there would not be unnecessary delays. We also published [information about the assessment options each Functional Skills awarding organisation offered](#), so that centres and students understood the range of choices available to them, and could make decisions about how to sit the assessments and with whom.

There were some students and apprentices who could not overcome genuine barriers to take Functional Skills assessments, despite the support from their centres and awarding organisations. In these cases, our VCRF permitted awarding organisations to issue results based on TAGs. We asked awarding organisations to establish clear eligibility criteria for TAGs, and to ensure their centres understood these criteria as well as the evidence that was needed to generate TAGs, so that results based on TAGs were still evidence-based, and sufficiently valid and reliable.

We also collected data from Functional Skills awarding organisations between April and August so that we could monitor the take up of assessments and help remove any obstacles, to assessment or the issue of results, if it became necessary.

Functional Skills qualifications results

[Change to table and accessible view](#)



As of the end of August, awarding organisations issued 121,697 qualification results based on assessments, compared to only 4,316 qualification results based on TAGs.

Phase 3: quality assurance and results

From October 2020 to September 2021, VTQ awarding organisations issued a total of 4.6 million certificates for their qualifications. We asked awarding organisations to balance carefully mitigating the effects of the pandemic with the need to provide fair and reliable results that allowed students to progress. In 58 per cent of the VTQs covered by the VCRF, results were determined based solely on normal or adapted assessments. In 10 per cent of VTQs, such as those of technical qualifications (TQs) in T Levels and technical qualifications approved for inclusion in Department for Education's performance tables, results were determined wholly or in part using alternative arrangements such as TAGs. The results of the remaining 32 per cent of VTQs were issued based on normal or adapted assessments where possible but were determined using TAGs where students were eligible to receive them.

Having checked the validity of awarding organisations' intended approaches to issuing results using alternative arrangements, we then monitored their processing and quality assurance of results to make sure that their approaches worked as intended. We also wrote to all awarding organisations, setting out clear expectations about how they should prepare centres for their results release so that students had the right information at the right time.

Quality assurance of results

Where awarding organisations used alternative arrangements to issue results, we required them to ensure that their approach included an initial determination of a student's result by using appropriate and relevant sources of information such as TAGs and/or banked component results, and a quality assurance check on that initial determination.

TAGs could be determined at a qualification, unit, or component level. They had to be based on appropriate evidence of a student's actual level of attainment, and there was a range of evidence that teachers and trainers could draw on to judge their students' attainment against the standard set for the relevant qualifications in previous years in which assessments took place. We required awarding organisations to ensure that centres were clear about the type and sufficiency of the evidence required to achieve consistent judgements when determining TAGs. We also required awarding organisations to ensure that centres had effective arrangements to internally quality assure their TAGs.

Many awarding organisations reviewed their centres' internal quality assurance procedures upfront, while others adapted their normal verification or moderation processes to provide centres with additional support throughout the TAG determination process. Some awarding organisations required centres to confirm that they had complied with their internal quality assurance arrangements and then sample-checked centres' records, while others directly confirmed whether internal quality assurance had taken place through external verification of every centre.

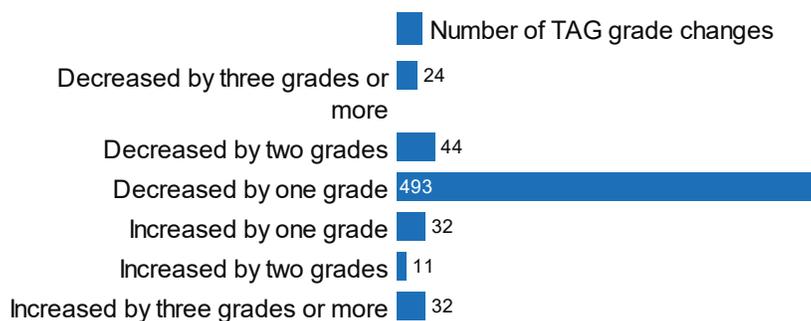
After centres submitted TAGs, awarding organisations conducted their own quality

assurance. They took different approaches, depending on the purpose and design of their qualifications and the part that TAGs had played in the final results. Some awarding organisations did this through an extension of their normal centre monitoring, some asked centres to provide rationales for any results that looked unusual and reviewed work from centres selected at random, others looked at a sample of student evidence from every centre, and many conducted a combination of these activities. Awarding organisations did not substitute their own result for a TAG submitted by a centre. Rather, where they did not consider that TAGs submitted to them were supported by the evidence, they required the centres to review their original judgment and supply another TAG where it was appropriate.

For those awarding organisations issuing results for technical qualifications approved for inclusion in performance tables, Ofqual collected data to monitor their progress in quality assuring results based on TAGs. Of the 904,674 TAGs that were submitted by centres for these qualifications, 302,782 were externally quality assured by awarding organisations. Of these, 2,447 TAGs were referred back to the centres for reconsideration and 636 TAG grades were changed. Below is a breakdown of the final status of those TAGs by change of grades.

Number of TAG grade changes

[Change to table and accessible view](#)



Issuing results

Awarding organisations and centres carry out a lot of preparation ahead of results release, especially for set results days, so that students can have the smoothest experience possible when receiving results. We expect awarding organisations to provide information to centres and students about which results will be published and when, and to work with their centres to maintain confidentiality of results and grade profiles ahead of results days.

In summer 2021, the results days for many VTQs that are similar in purpose to GCSE, AS and A levels were compressed into a single week to meet the government's expectation that these results should be issued to students no later than 10 August for Level 3 qualifications and no later than 12 August for Level 2 qualifications.

Ofqual gathered feedback from centres about what information or arrangements they wanted to have from awarding organisations to help them prepare results. We considered this feedback and facilitated the accurate and complete provision of information to centres and students. For example, we heard about the resource and time constraints that centres would face in preparing results, especially in the case of some large FE colleges that were expecting to receive over 100,000 individual results from multiple awarding organisations. We wrote to all awarding organisations to remind them of the need to send results data to centres in good time and in an accessible format that minimised the need for time-consuming manual handling. We gathered and published [information from all awarding organisations about the method they would use to issue results](#) and the file format of the results data, so that centres could better plan for the preparation and release of results.

Ofqual also published bespoke [guidance for centres](#) and [guidance for students](#) that provided a range of resources and explained how VTQs would be awarded in 2021, what the different arrangements meant for them, and where they could find additional information from their awarding organisations.

Phase 4: post-results

In an ordinary year, Ofqual requires awarding organisations to permit appeals on the basis that the awarding organisation did not apply procedures consistently or that procedures were not followed properly and fairly. Awarding organisations must provide for the appeal of:

- the results of assessments
- decisions regarding reasonable adjustments and special consideration
- decisions relating to any action to be taken against a student or a centre following an investigation into malpractice or maladministration

Appeals of results of assessments

This year, the arrangements for appeals of results of VTQ assessments continued as normal for students who were awarded results after taking assessments.

For students who were awarded results in a similar way to GCSEs, AS and A levels, government policy was that they should have access to a right of appeal on the same basis as those set out for GCSEs, AS and A levels. Unlike in other years, students themselves (rather than their centres) could decide whether to appeal. This meant that a student who believed their result was wrong could ask their centre to check whether there had been an administrative or procedural error. If no error was identified, the student could then ask their centre to submit an

appeal on their behalf to the awarding organisation. Students could also appeal on one or more grounds, for example, unreasonable exercise of academic judgement regarding selection of evidence and/or determination of a TAG, as well as a procedural error by the centre.

Where an appeal was made on the ground of unreasonable exercise of academic judgement, awarding organisations had to consider whether the evidence of the student's performance indicated that the grade represented a reasonable exercise of academic judgment or whether the selection of work the teacher had used to decide the grade was unreasonable. If the grade was supported by the evidence, the grade did not change. If the grade was not supported by the evidence, the awarding organisation could change the grade.

For students who were unable to take assessments for qualifications such as Functional Skills or ESOLs, and for whom results based on TAGs were declined due to lack of appropriate evidence, some awarding organisations provided an additional ground of appeal based on eligibility for TAGs. Other awarding organisations dealt with such cases through their normal complaints procedure.

Appeal outcomes

Ofqual collected data on appeals for the academic year 2020 to 2021 for the following qualifications and students in centres in England:

- all Tech Awards, Tech Certs, Tech Levels and Applied Generals
- all Functional Skills Qualifications
- all ESOL Skills for Life Qualifications
- all Core Maths, IB Diplomas, and Cambridge Pre-U's

Type of decision appealed	Appeals received	Appeals rejected	Completed appeals	Appeals upheld	Percent of completed appeals upheld
Eligibility for TAG	115	10	105	55	55.3
Result based on assessment	670	10	660	230	35.0
Result based on TAG	1,535	140	1,500	1,245	83.0
Malpractice or maladministration	105	0~	100	100	98.0
Reasonable adjustment	10	0	10	10	72.7
Special	25	0~	25	15	56.5

As of 25 November 2021, awarding organisations have received 2,460 appeals for the above qualifications, completed 2,400 of these and have upheld 1,655 appeals (68.9 percent of those completed). Appeals of results, whether based on assessment or TAG (2,205 appeals received), accounted for 89.6 percent of all appeals received. These appeals covered 3,415 grades. The awarding organisations upheld 68.3 percent of the completed appeals of results, which led to 2,310 grades changed upward, and 270 grades changed downward.

The table above shows the volumes of appeals received, completed, and upheld, broken down by type of decision that was appealed. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 5. Figures less than 5 are denoted by 0~ and 0 represents zero values.

The largest number of appeals awarding organisations received (1,300 appeals) were made on the grounds of administrative errors made by centres, for example, where a centre submitted an incorrect grade or used an incorrect assessment mark when determining a grade. Awarding organisations upheld 97.3 percent of the completed appeals made on this ground.

Awarding organisations received 410 appeals made on the grounds of unreasonable exercise of academic judgement, either on the part of the awarding organisation (for example, where an awarding organisation made an unreasonable judgement while awarding marks to an assessment) or on the part of a centre (for example, where a centre made an unreasonable judgement in the determination of a grade based on available evidence). Awarding organisations upheld 18.3 percent of the completed appeals made on this ground.

Conclusion and next steps

From October 2020 to September 2021, awarding organisations issued approximately 4.6 million VTQ certificates, which is an increase of 9 percent compared to the same period in the previous year. Ofqual's principles-led regulatory framework gave awarding organisations the flexibility to continue to deliver assessments where necessary, and to continue to issue valid and reliable results. Awarding organisations and centres worked together in the most complex and challenging circumstances to seek to achieve fairness and to award results that enabled students to progress onto the next stages of their lives. We saw great strides made in innovation, where many awarding organisations, centres, and students successfully adapted to the changing circumstances and challenges brought by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

We worked with the awarding organisations to provide guidance and support to make these challenge more manageable, and we thank teachers and other centre staff for all their work this year to ensure that assessments were delivered, judgments were made, internally quality assured and submitted on time.

For the academic year 2021 to 2022, the government's intention is that exams and assessments including for VTQs will go ahead. Following [consultation on the arrangements for awarding of vocational, technical and other general qualifications in 2021 to 2022](#), Ofqual published an updated [VCRF](#) so that from 1 September 2021 all VTQs would be awarded based on evidence from exams and other assessments. We have also published guidance for centres on the awarding of VTQs in 2021 and 2022.

Our framework continues to permit awarding organisations to make adaptations to their assessments and qualifications to assist in mitigating the ongoing impact of the pandemic. We will therefore monitor awarding organisations' preparation for, and management of risks related to assessment delivery for next year, with a focus on the use and implementation of adaptations. We consider cyber security, third-party supplier capacity, and quality and consistency of centre-marked assessments the top risks that awarding organisations should mitigate and manage. Our regulatory activities will reflect these risks.

We will also monitor the take-up and development of remote assessment and remote invigilation in VTQs, following our [VCRF guidance](#) and our [blog post on remote assessment and invigilation](#). We would encourage more awarding organisations to lead the way to test and implement new approaches to qualification delivery. And we are keen to continue to play our part and give our support for innovative responses to the issues to learning and assessment brought by the pandemic.

In the event that assessments do not proceed as planned in 2022 because of coronavirus (COVID-19), the Department for Education has published a [contingency plan for VTQs](#). This includes using TAGs for VTQs that are most similar to GCSEs, AS and A Levels; and delaying VTQs awards that require students to demonstrate occupational or professional competence to ensure that students are able to demonstrate the full set of knowledge and skills required.

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