

Teacher-assessed grading

One teacher's view

By an anonymous teacher

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic severely disrupted education at all levels. One consequence was that alternative arrangements had to be made for the 2021 summer public examinations. Exam boards asked staff at schools and colleges to generate, for each subject, teacher-assessed grades for their students. The submitted grades had to reflect 'a fair, reasonable and carefully considered judgement of the student's performance across a range of evidence, on the curriculum content that they have been taught'.¹ A process of standardisation had to be established within each centre, which exam boards would check. Ofqual recommended that evidence to support the teacher-assessed grades (TAGs) which students were given should include answers to past papers and trial exam questions, performance on coursework tasks and school-set tests devised to reflect the exam specifications, and teacher records of a student's capability and performance over the course of study. The following article is based on reflections compiled in June 2021 on the experience of awarding TAGs by a teacher who works in an urban sixth form centre. The teacher's name, and the name of the centre, have been withheld.

Keywords: teacher-assessed grades; summer 2021 examinations; grade inflation; summative assessment

Can you provide some information about the students you worked with in 2021?

In my sixth form centre, the majority of students, several hundred, are retaking GCSE English in the hope of securing a grade 4. Another sizeable cohort, perhaps a couple of hundred, are taking GCSE English for the first time, in order to prepare them for work at A-level. Another hundred or so students are taking A-level English literature, or language, or the combined lang/lit course.

What kinds of evidence were used to arrive at teacher-assessed grades?

Grades have mostly been based on three or four timed in-class assessments undertaken in the last three months of the course and looking to cover as wide a range of topics as possible. Most teaching, bar that for the first A-level year, was concluded by Easter to allow time for marking, moderation and mopping up.

Was there a positive side to the grading process in the summer?

Those who knew the students best have decided their grades. Initially there was a high level of teacher discretion in judging how to assess a student, and to adjust for any extenuating circumstances. That said, such adjustments may be revised by managers before the marks are sent to the exam boards. A high level of professionalism, impartiality and integrity characterised the work at our centre in terms of assessing, moderating and grading. Students were under far less pressure than in 'normal' years to cram. This made the work of exam preparation and revision much less stressful for students than in previous years. The system seemed fairer: it offered more opportunities for students to perform well. The evidence-based process allowed for an approach more akin to compiling a portfolio, as for example happens on access courses, with a wide range of areas of the syllabus taught and assessed but in a way more reflective of real-world situations. This year will suit students who prefer coursework to terminal exams.

What particular difficulties or drawbacks did you experience?

Students have missed some or all of our less-formal final assessments for a variety of reasons. A formal exam would have been better attended. In general, there's been an insufficient range of evidence to enable a secure grading decision to be arrived at for a significant proportion of students, perhaps as many as 30 per cent in the case of the GCSE cohort. A small but significant percentage of students haven't attended in person since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Some are extremely anxious about the virus because they are shielding, or for other health-related reasons. This situation obviously makes assessing and grading very difficult. Assessments completed online can't be said to be free of plagiarism.

Did the imperative to teach online during lockdown cause problems?

Many students' engagement with online lessons, including submitting completed work and assignments, was minimal, for a range of reasons. Students lacked digital devices or broadband access, or a home environment conducive to study. Inevitably, students with the means and motivation to work well independently have done better than students who would have benefited from peer support, one-to-one support, meals provided by the centre, help from teaching assistants and so on.

Were students able to access the whole syllabus?

The pandemic meant that not all the syllabus could be taught or assessed. The syllabus

has been accessed to differing degrees by different students. Students have gaps in their knowledge, or deficiencies in their skills, which may impact adversely on their futures in higher education and/or work.

You mentioned that managers may adjust marks before these are sent to exam boards. Could you comment further?

Marking, moderation and grading decisions have been rushed in order that managers can scrutinise data long before the exam boards' deadlines. This has meant that not all available evidence has been considered, or considered in adequate detail. The grades for a cohort are not being based purely on the evidence students have produced. Managers are forcing adjustments to an individual's grades so that the results for the cohort fit with a one-year set of results, pre-lockdown, and to be within a narrow 3 per cent tolerance of previous years' results to satisfy the exam boards and to produce positive 'value-added' scores. This has upset a lot of teachers and seems unfair on the students affected. There is great pressure bearing down to avoid grade inflation.

Are there any other drawbacks or difficulties you'd like to mention?

I feel there's ample opportunity to game the system to produce evidence supportive of higher grades. It is said that some centres are assessing students again and again on the same topic, or on very similar topics, and giving both marks and feedback each time, until the student secures the desired score. In other centres, teachers have been overwhelmed with marking. Centres are all using differing processes, so the national results for this year can't be seen as fair. An A grade from one centre can't be seen as the same as an A grade from another. There's been little guidance from the exam boards to help with the administrative load, for example how to record results and file evidence. Such guidance as we've had has been vague. There's been little in the way of model assessment materials too. Yet exam boards have still charged full fees. A nightmarish appeals process in August is anticipated!

Note

1. Ofqual, 'Information for heads of centre, heads of department and teachers on the submission of teacher assessed grades: summer 2021 (HTML)', <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/submission-of-teacher-assessed-grades-summer-2021-info-for-teachers/information-for-heads-of-centre-heads-of-department-and-teachers-on-the-submission-of-teacher-assessed-grades-summer-2021-html>, 8 June 2021.