



# Assessing and grading students in summer 2021:

## 10 things to consider before Easter

	Page
<b>What you might do now – leaning towards formative assessment</b>	1. Reassure and manage expectations 2
	2. Focus on teaching the curriculum 4
	3. Diagnostic assessment & responsive teaching 4
	4. Work from the curriculum 5
	5. Professional development 5
<b>What you might do after Easter – moving towards summative assessment</b>	6. Plan and communicate timings and process carefully 6
	7. Be aware of construct underrepresentation 7
	8. Consider reliability 8
	9. Subject difference 10
	10. Be cautious with grades (at least for the moment) 11



## Introduction

This short guidance is not a 'how to' guide on how you should approach assessment and grading in summer 2021. Also, it is not intended to be read instead of DfE, Ofqual and exam board guidance – which you should familiarise yourself with as it becomes published. Rather, these ten things to consider are intended to prompt your thinking and support your decision-making process, moving from the immediate to the period after Easter. The idea isn't that you *do* all of them before Easter – in fact in places it makes the case that there are some things you can't yet do. So, the first five are things to do now, the latter five relate to things you might want to do after Easter. But all ten are things you might want to *think* about over the next few weeks.

While we know more now about how the process will work, following the outcome of the DfE/Ofqual consultation (DfE & Ofqual, 2021), there are still a lot of unknowns – primarily how exam boards will enact the policy decisions made by DfE/Ofqual. Exam boards now have work to do in order to translate policy into practice. You will also see that some of the Ofqual guidance referred to below is being consulted on currently so is still in draft format. All of which means we need to move forward with some caution, being clear about what decisions we can make now and where we need more information.

## What you might do now – leaning towards formative assessment

### 1. Reassure and manage expectations

There has been a lot of media coverage on this topic, not all of it helpful from the perspective of students who may be feeling anxious. Reassure students by sharing with them a simple summary of what we know about the awarding process. In particular, explain that the arrangements are designed to ensure that students will be assessed



on what they have studied, not what they haven't. Emphasise that you will be building *processes* around assessment and grading that mean grades will be as fair as possible. For example, students who are concerned they might have a teacher who is a harsh marker can be given reassurance that the teacher will be working from exam board guidance and the school will be putting in place processes to make sure that grades across a department are moderated so that grades are given with proper oversight.

However, also try to avoid the trap of over-promising, or risk saying something you later have to row back on, while we await further details from the exam boards. Part of the reason why Ofqual/DfE opted for this model of awarding is that it has to be able to withstand periods of further disruption which could yet occur. Furthermore, as noted above we are still awaiting the detailed guidance from exam boards. All of this means we need to reassure without creating expectations that we later discover are undeliverable. For this reason it is probably best to focus on principles at the current time, summarising what we know from the consultation but not sharing details which go beyond what is described in the consultation outcome.

It is remarkable to see how schools and trusts have already begun to talk to students and parents about the emerging awarding process. Videos, summary sheets and one-to-one discussions are likely to be useful in ensuring parents and students understand the process. Of course, this is made difficult by the fact that, as noted above, there are still some details to emerge – particularly the subject level guidance and assessment activities from exam boards. It's ok to let stakeholders know that this is an unfolding picture so you may not yet have all the answers, that you'll share more as soon as you can, and that you'll do your best to answer their questions at each stage. Also, don't underestimate the importance of communicating clearly with staff, and in some instances this might be about ensuring staff don't go beyond the school's message by offering unhelpful, if well-intentioned, speculation as to what might happen, or veering away from the school's carefully considered plan.



## 2. Focus on teaching the curriculum

As noted above, focus on outlining principles at the current time. The first of these principles is that what matters most right now is that students get the opportunity to enjoy being back in school, being taught the beautiful content of each subject: assessment will come but now is about learning the curriculum. Let's enjoy it.

## 3. Diagnostic assessment & responsive teaching

If we've adopted the stance outlined above – that what matters immediately is learning the curriculum – then this is what assessment should be supporting in the first instance. Rather than reaching straight for summative assessment and the accumulation of 'evidence' to support grading, now is the time to be using low-stakes diagnostic assessment to inform the teaching and learning process.

These simple but powerful questions from the EEF (2020, p. 10) are useful for teachers to consider:

- *What learning has been lost or misunderstood?*
- *Should we re-teach that material to the whole group, or move on?*

In order to answer these questions teachers don't need to know who is a grade 7, or a grade C etc, they need to know how well students have learned and remembered specific key content from the curriculum. This need not result in lots of marking or pupil anxiety; it could be done through question and answer or short peer-marked tests. Explain how these will help teachers to make good decisions about what to re-teach and so on, and thus it will benefit them. Also, reassure students that if you're saying these are low-stakes diagnostic assessments then they will **not** form part of the evidence used for grading.

Think about the format of these assessments and select the right tool for the job. Longer essays might be useful for assessing aspects of students' writing and





argumentation but a multiple-choice quiz could be the better option if you're just seeking to identify whether particular constructs have been learned, such as the date of an event in history or the meaning of a particular scientific term.

Diagnostic assessment is an essential part of responsive teaching (Fletcher-Wood 2018).

## 4. Work from the curriculum

Diagnostic assessment is a good assessment strategy to use but it is important to ensure that you're asking the right questions. If teachers have a clear sense of the granular detail of the curriculum they will be better placed to know which questions to ask and to be able to spot when students don't know something teachers would expect them to know. However, sometimes this level of detail is not clearly codified within subject teams – sometimes it exists in the resources teachers use, such as PowerPoints, but may not be clearly set out beyond this. In order to ensure diagnostic assessment explores the most important content teachers may first need to do some thinking about exactly what pupils need to have learned. As ever, curriculum and assessment go hand-in-hand.

## 5. Professional development

Don't underestimate the knowledge and skill required to carry out effective assessment. While teachers tend to do lots of assessment, sometimes unconsciously, in the normal course of teaching, what is being asked of them this year is – for most teachers – likely to be new. It is important to note this is not the same process that staff went through last year, partly because of the differing guidance but also because last year's cohort had completed much more of their courses before the pandemic struck. This year's cohort have suffered much more disruption, often uneven, and thus assessment will be a different task. Staff will, therefore, benefit from high quality professional development on assessment. While this will involve reference to the



guidelines set out by DfE/Ofqual and the exam boards, it may be useful to support staff to look more fundamentally at assessment practice. Doing so will not only benefit the assessment and awarding process this year but also have a positive impact on teacher effectiveness in subsequent years.

## What you might do after Easter – moving towards summative assessment

### 6. Plan and communicate timings and process carefully

We expect more guidance to support assessment will be published in late March and that exam board produced assessment materials will be provided by Easter. From this point schools will be able to see more clearly the detail about how assessment and grading will take place. This is likely to mean that schools and teachers will be able to make firmer plans about exactly how the process will work. For example, from this point students will be able to begin carrying out the questions provided by exam boards – although schools may choose to do this later. The key is to make sure you provide sufficient time for key activities to be undertaken, while trying to preserve teaching time as much as possible. These will include things like:

- Teaching the curriculum.
- Subject teachers, subject teams and leaders understand the requirements and how they will action these. For example, time will be needed for teachers to identify which evidence they will use.
- Students to undertake some assessment tasks (timings for this might look different across subjects).
- Marking.
- Internal quality assurance.
- Sign off.
- Submission of grades (the deadline for this is June 18<sup>th</sup>).

[This](#) timeline from Pearson provides a useful overview of the key milestones.





## 7. Be aware of construct underrepresentation

In order to draw valid inferences from an assessment we must have confidence that the assessment reveals meaningful insight into the thing we want to assess. This might seem self-evident but it is worth considering this in more depth this year particularly. Firstly, let's define the domain of a subject as a 'construct'. It is a thing we want to assess; we want to know how well pupil A has learned the construct that is subject X. As Wiliam (2020, p. 28) argues, "if the construct has been defined properly, different people should agree about whether a particular set of assessments adequately samples the domain of interest." In 'normal' years much of this weight is carried by the exam board who design assessments that are intended to do a good job of representing the content of those subjects (as outlined in the specification).

However, this year the situation is more complicated. Schools will be doing more of the work to ensure that the assessment represents the construct. And this is trickier again because some students won't have studied all the content due to the disruption caused by Covid-19. So, what is the construct for subject X taken to be this year? This is why it is important to note that exam boards have been asked by Ofqual/DfE to issue further grade descriptors and guidance to support grading: "Exam boards will provide further advice and guidance to exemplify the standard of work, including additional grade descriptors to supplement those previously published by Ofqual, as well as exemplar materials" (Ofqual, 2021 ii). The hope is that these descriptors help schools to ensure the assessment tasks they use adequately represent the construct.

We need to sample from across a broad sweep of the domain (in this case the specification) in order to ensure we make valid inferences about a pupil's performance in the subject. This is a point echoed by Christodoulou (2016). This year schools will need to think carefully about which parts of the domain they sample (some of which will be dictated by what has/hasn't been taught). For example, we might need to make sure that we sample more difficult aspects of the domain if we are to be able to support inferences about achievement at the higher grades. ***Some of this will be hard to do***

*until we have more details from the exam boards, particularly the grade descriptors against which student performance will be judged.*

For now, we can see some of this reflected in the draft Ofqual (2021 i, p. 4) handbook for heads of centre and teachers:

*Schools “should aim to assess students on as broad a range of specification content as they can. Evidence should relate to the specification content and should reflect, as far as possible, the sorts of questions and tasks that students would normally undertake in preparation for the qualification. Questions and tasks should be appropriately accessible for lower ability students and appropriately demanding to allow higher ability students to demonstrate performance to support higher grades.”*

## 8. Consider reliability

How can you be confident that students’ scores on an assessment are reliable? Christodoulou (2016, p. 60) offered three useful prompts to help us consider aspects of reliability:

- *If a pupil were to take different versions of the same test, they should get approximately the same mark.*
- *If they were to take the test at different times of day, they should get approximately the same mark.*
- *If a pupil’s answer paper was submitted to ten different markers, it should return each time with the same mark.*

William (2020) goes further to describe the relationship between ‘construct-irrelevant variance’ and reliability. That is to say, the extent to which the assessment is influenced by things beyond the intended scope of the assessment. This is one reason why exams are usually conducted in exam conditions; so that we can limit the chances that other factors influence student performance, such as another candidate telling them the answer or them not being able to concentrate because of background noise. It is worth





considering what you can do to try to make sure that the assessments you use are as valid and reliable as can reasonably be achieved in the circumstances.

As noted above, students are likely to be reassured by the processes we can put around assessment in order to ensure it is as reliable as possible. This will mean trying to make sure that, across a centre, there is as much commonality as possible about the assessment tasks that are used, although adjustments may be needed for some individuals for whom particular evidence is not available. Moreover, marking will need to be as consistent as possible, underpinned by effective quality assurance. And these things may prove to be very important if schools find the grades they issue are subject to appeal. Being able to point to transparent, rigorous and consistent processes will likely be of benefit to the centre in such a situation.

This is reflected in the draft Ofqual (2021 i, p. 8) handbook for heads of centre and teachers, which states “Each grade for a subject must be signed off by at least 2 teachers in that subject, one of whom should be the head of department or subject lead. Where there is only one teacher in the subject or department, or only one is available, the head of centre should be the second signatory. Where a staff member might have a personal interest in a candidate (for example as a relative), heads of centre should make sure that additional controls are put in place, as appropriate.”

Centres may, for example, consider whether some assessment tasks should be blind marked so as to avoid aspects of bias creeping in. The draft Ofqual (2021 iii) handbook to support objectivity lists factors which can affect the objectivity of judgments:

- *confirmation bias, for example noticing only evidence about a student that fits with pre-existing views about them*
- *masking or halo effects, for example where a particular view about an aspect of a student hides, or overly accentuates, their actual knowledge, skills and abilities*
- *recency effects, for example giving undue weight to the most recent interaction with a student or the most recent piece of work done by a student*



- *primacy effects, for example giving undue weight to 'first impressions' of a student*
- *selective perceptions, for example giving undue weight to a student's performance on a particular part of the content of the specification rather than considering performance across all the material that they have been taught*
- *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*
- *outlier effects, for example, under-estimating a student's performance if it is significantly out of line with (above or below) other students in that centre, for example some students may have performed less well during periods of remote learning*

It is worth noting that the draft Ofqual (2021 ii, p. 14) assessment framework stipulates: "an awarding organisation should encourage a Centre using Additional Assessment Materials to deliver any assessment based on them on the same day to all of its Learners taking the relevant GQ Qualification where the same questions or tasks are used." This is, presumably, to try to ensure that students within a centre do not share questions with each other and in doing so cause advantage/disadvantage to their peers.

There has rightly been much talk about the need for assessment and grading in 2021 to be 'fair'. Valid and reliable assessment is an essential aspect of this.

## 9. Subject difference

There is a tendency in school leadership towards generic approaches (Lock, 2020). While there are some aspects of the assessment and awarding process that are likely to be generic across subjects, some of which may be born out in the awarding framework Ofqual is currently consulting on, there may be some areas where subjects will need to take different approaches. Indeed, this is not uncommon in a 'normal year'.



Some of these subject differences are reflected in the DfE/Ofqual (2021, p. 4) consultation outcome, which stipulates that:

- *In GCSE, AS and A level art and design, the student's grade must be based on the portfolio<sup>1</sup> only, whether or not it has been completed.*
- *In GCSE English language, GCSE modern foreign languages and A level sciences (biology, chemistry, physics and geology), centres should determine and submit a separate grade or result for the endorsement. This result or grade should be based on work that has been completed towards the endorsement.*

Leaders should consider within their guidance for staff where there might need to be flexibility or different approaches taken. Conversations with subject specialist teams will be important and you will, of course, need to have regard of any subject specific guidance exam boards will publish.

## 10. Be cautious with grades (at least for the moment)

Students may be anxious about what is/isn't going to count towards their grade. It may be that until we receive more detailed guidance from exam boards we are not able to specify this precisely. However, we can in the meantime remember to be cautious about how we use grades with students. For example, is it useful to continue to grade classwork, if that is routine practice in the school, if doing so could create a false sense of a student's likely final grade? Moreover, schools might find that using grades too liberally with students at the current time stores up problems for the future in the form of appeals where students later feel their final grade is not representative of particular grades they received beforehand. This is not to say that schools should not use grades at all, just that staff need to be judicious in how they do so in order to help manage students through this process. Once teachers have a clearer picture of the evidence they are going to use this should be easier to manage.



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