

Royal Statistical Society Statement regarding the grade awarding process in 2021

The Department for Education (DfE) announced its plans for awarding GCSEs, AS Levels and A Levels on 25th February: grades will be awarded by teachers, based on a range of evidence. After the difficulties of 2020 – when the government instructed Ofqual to design a statistical methodology to adjust centre-awarded grades – this year there will be no statistical process to adjust individual students' grades.

Last year, the RSS was involved – early, persistently and in detail – in policy and public discussions about the grading “algorithm” that was eventually abandoned. We expect the Office for Statistics Regulation report on that process to be published shortly.

Teaching this year has been even more disrupted than last, without uniform coverage of subject topics or modules by schools, or by students within schools. Any exams, even if administered by teachers, would be measures of educational disadvantage as much as anything else. It is difficult to see any route forward other than teacher-assessed grades.

The RSS understands concerns about consistency between schools, which is important not only for ‘fairness’, but also because it helps ensure that universities and further education and employers can be confident about what teacher-awarded grades mean.

The main mechanisms for addressing this issue – both of which raise statistical issues – are the plans for *internal quality assurance* (how different ‘exam centres’ – schools -- decide to award their own grades) and *external quality assurance* (to ensure consistency between exam centres, where the responsibility has been devolved to exam boards, working separately and together). The [government's statement](#) addresses these issues only in very general terms. But the devil will be in the detail.

First, regarding internal quality assurance. The government's plan is to provide each exam centre with information about ‘the centre's profile of results in previous years as a guide to help them to check that their judgements are not unduly harsh or lenient.’ This does not set a limit to the individual grades that can be awarded, and there seems to be no requirement that schools need even use this information to develop their own process for awarding grades. There is no statistical ‘norm-setting’. But how much this historical data informs individual schools' decisions will depend on the further guidance given to schools about how they might – or even should -- use it. **The further guidance that is promised should address this.**

Second, regarding external quality assurance. Exam boards will carry out ‘more detailed checks of a sample of centres, reviewing the evidence for one or more subjects. Some centres will be selected from a random sample that is representative of different centre types and some will be selected based on risk.’ Checks will not be based on a random sampling alone. This means that previous historical exam results will play some part in identifying schools where there may be concerns about the grade awarding process. This could be helpful in ensuring greater consistency in the processes used by different schools, and possibly even in addressing to some degree concerns about systematic ‘over-generous’ marking, with its knock-on effects for university, FE and employer confidence in the grades. We assume this is what is meant by ‘risk-based’ sampling. Again, further guidance is promised.

If this approach is to command public confidence – and allow universities, FE institutions and employers to understand the grades given – we believe it is essential that exam boards are transparent about what type of changes from historical patterns might trigger an external quality check. From our perspective, the important lesson from last year is that using statistics as an

aid to human judgement can be helpful – but only when they are used clearly and deliberately, with appropriate justification. It is important that we all learn this lesson.

Sharon Witherspoon, Royal Statistical Society Vice-President for Education and Statistical Literacy, said:

“While a system of teacher awarded grades will help avoid some of last year's issues in the awarding of grades, we need to see more detail. We understand that schools will be given results from previous years, but there is no information about how teachers should use this data. And we would like to see transparency and more detail from exam boards about the sorts of changes from historical patterns that might trigger an external quality check.

“However, the decision to use statistics to focus on the processes schools use in awarding grades, rather than to adjust individual grades, seems right to us in principle. The outstanding question is how tightly historical data will be used to trigger discussion with schools about the way they have awarded grades.

“Whatever happens, statisticians won't be the only ones to ask if there will be further 'grade inflation' compared to last year. Historically grades have been used for many things – to set thresholds for decisions such as awarding university places, to create league tables for schools (though that won't apply this year), and to help people make distinctions between individuals. There are wider issues here in addition to purely statistical ones. The way statistics are used in each of these matters though, and can have real effects for individuals, schools and society.”

