

Emerging principles and guidance regarding teacher professional judgements for summer 2020 in Northern Ireland

(This paper is based on the [guidance issued by ASCL](#) on 30 March 2020 which reflects the situation in England).

Following the decision that no public examinations will take place during this summer, school leaders and teachers are beginning to address how the process of assigning grades to pupils will operate. ASCL Northern Ireland is in close contact with CCEA and the Department of Education on a regular basis as this process is hammered out. It will be the responsibility of CCEA to report to DE on its recommendation for the way forward. DE will make the decision on the process to be followed in Northern Ireland.

There are a number of important principles to bear in mind regarding this process.

The government at Westminster has determined that schools will not be held to account for their performance based on this summer's teacher-assessed grades. While we do not have official league tables in Northern Ireland, however, it is essential that school leaders and teachers put headline measures out of their minds when approaching this exercise. It is entirely about ensuring that students receive reasonable grades so that their own lives are as unaffected as possible. Any attempts, by any organisation, to use the results of 2020 to draw comparisons between schools would be unhelpful and inappropriate in these circumstances.

It may be that teachers in Northern Ireland are asked to make professional judgements in order to contribute to accumulating a picture of their students' performance. ASCL would expect that the national picture for teacher professional judgements will be similar to that which would have occurred if the students concerned had actually taken their exams. It is understandable that teachers might want to give more students the benefit of the doubt by, for example, awarding more C grades than they might otherwise have obtained. But this would be wrong for several reasons:

- CCEA, and Ofqual in the case of English awarding organisations' examinations taken in Northern Ireland, will take steps to ensure that grade distributions do indeed match previous years. Where centres produce grades which seem

particularly generous, a moderation process will be applied. It will be important that not only should standards between centres within Northern Ireland be consistent, but that Northern Irish students are neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by the approach taken by CCEA.

- Assuming that things head back to normal for the 2021 cohort, an inflated picture in 2020 would disadvantage those students currently in Year 11 and Year 13. They have enough to contend with having had their own studies disrupted.

The process of teachers making professional judgements has some difficult ethical issues associated with it. We know that there are historic differences in performance between girls and boys, between disadvantaged pupils and their non-disadvantaged peers and so on. For this reason, and should teachers be asked to contribute to grade allocation, teachers should ask themselves the question “What grade would this particular student most plausibly have achieved if they were taking the exam?”. This is not to be confused with a target grade, which might have an inflationary effect if used instead. Whilst we should as a profession be exercised about the inequalities which are present in the system, this is not the moment or the method to put it right.

We would therefore suggest the process teachers should use to address this task is as follows:

For each pupil, teachers should ask, based on the objective evidence available to them:

- a) what grade would this learner have most likely achieved?
- b) how might the learner rank in order of the class group and subject group from your centre? This is a difficult process and relies on teachers being fair and reasonable with their own pupils but also understanding the same process is being applied everywhere else.
- c) Finally, consider whether the cohort of pupils and their grades taken together would be what you would have expected on results day taking into account whether that individual subject in that school performs above or below national average.

On a practical note, ASCL Northern Ireland would advise teachers and leaders, in line with [advice](#) issued by CCEA on 27 March 2020 to suspend internal assessment arrangements for CCEA GCSE and GCE qualifications. CCEA further advised on 30 March 2020 by email that teachers/learners may wish to continue to cover the content and learning outcomes in the relevant specification, if circumstances allow, to help prepare the learner for the next stage of their education, training or employment. ASCL accepts that this is extremely

challenging in the current circumstances, but all effort should be made to do what can be done in order to reasonably prepare learners for any possible future outcome.

Detailed [guidance](#) has been issued by Ofqual on 3 April and will shortly emerge from CCEA, and the regulator for Wales about how this process will work. Schools and colleges should ensure they follow the advice carefully.

There is no need to rush; what is important is that the process is well thought through and works in the best interest of students. We greatly appreciate that many of our members have their own ideas and concerns about all of this. We would like to reassure all of them that everyone involved is working very hard and with great sensitivity to make this fair. Above all, this process will only work if the profession works together in a consistent, fair and ethical way. The students affected by this deserve nothing less.

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