

Perceptions and experiences of grading in summer 2021: Research with education professionals in Wales

Summary



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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, learners in Wales have suffered significant disruption to their learning since March 2020 through school closures, lockdowns, and the use of “learning bubbles”. This disruption, combined with ongoing uncertainty around the spread of the virus and the associated feasibility of holding exams, led Welsh Government to [announce](#) that GCSEs, AS and A levels would be awarded through a centre determined grade (CDG) model in summer 2021. The Design and Delivery Advisory Group were asked to work with Qualifications Wales and WJEC-CBAC (WJEC) in developing and setting out the implementation of the approach.

This involved centres determining grades based on their own assessment approach rather than having learners sit standardised assessments, such as exams. WJEC provided training, guidance, adapted past papers, qualification assessment frameworks, and quality assurance, but did not change grades. Approaches were more varied for vocational qualifications depending on the design and purpose of the qualification.

1.2. Research requirements and objectives

Qualifications Wales commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to undertake a two-stage research project involving an online survey and depth interviews to explore the perceptions and experiences of centre staff who were involved in making or overseeing grading decisions in summer 2021. The research explored:

- The use of evidence and assessments in making grading decisions
- How centres worked together to determine grades
- The effectiveness of internal standardisation, and external quality assurance
- The manageability of the CDG process
- The usefulness of grade descriptors, training, guidance, and support
- Confidence in the grades awarded by centres
- Whether and how the approach advantaged or disadvantaged learners
- What worked well and what lessons can be learned from the CDG process
- What teacher assessment should look like in future.

1.3. Methodology

ORS designed the online survey in partnership with Qualifications Wales. All centre staff who were involved in grading in summer 2021 were invited to take part in the online survey. The survey was live between 14 September and 8 October 2021. ORS received just under 400 responses to the survey, with a good spread of responses from those in a range of roles from across Wales.

ORS researchers conducted 30 depth interviews: 25 in English, and five in Welsh, with staff in various roles from a range of centres across Wales. Most of the interview questions referred back to interviewees' survey responses and explored them in more depth, although some interview questions were not covered in the survey, and vice versa.

The report summarises the views of a number of centre staff involved in centre determined grading and is valuable for understanding their perspective. However, as this was a self-selecting methodology, the sample is not representative of all staff across all centres in Wales. As most staff were not directly involved in the process of determining the policy, many participants will not have had a full appreciation of all aspects of relevant policy or the challenges of introducing a centre determined grading approach in the circumstances.

1.4. Main findings

1.4.1. Gathering and using assessment evidence

The number of additional assessments organised for grading purposes varied substantially. Most participants stated that they selected the same evidence for all learners to inform grading in a subject. This was said to be largely to ensure fairness and consistency, including in preparing learners to progress to further learning after their GCSEs, and to reduce burden on staff. A few also felt the awarding body required this, possibly reflecting a misunderstanding in expectations.

Participants mainly said that they used the adapted past papers provided by WJEC or the awarding body to make grading decisions. Some noted that they further adapted these past papers before use. Others used unadapted past papers from previous years.

Participants noted that they tended to select their evidence for grading based on the perceived importance of adhering to awarding bodies' guidance, and concerns about external quality assurance, reflecting a recurring theme in this study. In some cases, senior leaders and Heads of Department were said to have led decisions around selecting evidence for grading. The exact weighting of the assessments and how/when they were conducted was said to vary between centres.

Overall, participants felt that they had enough flexibility when selecting evidence for grading. However, some reflected that they would have welcomed access to unseen papers from WJEC. Some learners had memorised the published past papers which were used for assessment, which teachers felt gave them an unfair advantage over learners

who had not, reflecting another recurring theme in the study. Others said that they did not use the flexibility they had due to concerns that this would leave them vulnerable to challenge during external quality assurance and appeals processes, and a few felt that their centre had restricted their flexibility to select evidence.

The majority of participants felt that the following were important factors when deciding how much evidence to use for grading:

- Provision of a robust evidence base to make judgements and in case of appeals
- Giving learners the best opportunity to show what they could do; and
- Centre policies.

Perceived or actual pressure from learners and parents was not felt to be important when making decisions around evidence gathering by many of those interviewed.

When asked at interview whether and how they had used grade boundaries, most participants said that they used adapted grade boundaries set by awarding bodies. Some participants felt that the grade descriptors given to them by WJEC would have been better if they had been more detailed and included all grades.

Participants usually explained that cases that were on the borderline between one grade and another were handled through double marking during the internal standardisation process. Although most said that they felt confident when dealing with borderline cases, many found this stressful because of the potential for appeals or external scrutiny.

When asked what they understood by the guidance point to make holistic judgements, all participants said that they understood making holistic academic judgements to mean that they should consider learners' wider performance throughout their GCSE study when making grading decisions rather than basing decisions on single assessments.

1.4.1.1. Training and guidance

Nearly all participants felt clear on their roles and responsibilities throughout the grading process and were confident in their abilities to deliver them. Support from centre colleagues and leadership teams in ensuring clarity was said to be greatly valued. To further clarify their roles and responsibilities, participants said that they would have welcomed:

- Earlier decisions on, and notifications of, changes to the grading process
- Videos showing best practice; and
- Sample assessments, especially for new subjects.

Most participants said that they were aware of, and had attended, training on the grading process provided by their own centres. In comparison, around half of participants said that they were aware of and had attended training provided by WJEC. Overall, participants felt that the training provided by WJEC and Qualifications Wales was clear and helpful, especially that which covered unconscious bias and standardisation. Some

criticised the training because they felt that it came too late, and that it lacked detail about the evidence that could be used for grading.

1.4.2. Internal standardisation

Participants tended to say that they graded their own learners, then picked a sample for a colleague to moderate. Where centres had more than one subject specialist for the level being marked, subject leaders said that they standardised across the teachers in the first instance and then passed papers to the Director of Learning. In centres where there was only one teacher of a particular subject, moderation was conducted by the Director of Learning, or links were made with teachers of the subject in another centre.

Most participants said that it was easy to agree grades with colleagues during internal standardisation. The most common issue encountered was said to be logistical difficulties in holding discussions. Although most felt that internal standardisation was effective, both overall, and as a quality assurance process, some expressed that it was difficult, stressful, and time-consuming.

Participants said that they changed grades both up and down following internal standardisation. Grades were changed to:

- Accurately represent learners' performance across different assessments
- Reflect rigorous standardisation processes
- Correct errors; and
- Take account of prior learning, and memorisation of published past papers.

1.4.3. Quality assurance and grade accuracy

In general, participants said that they graded for learners they had taught, rather than for those they had not. A mixed picture was obtained regarding the extent to which centres discussed approaches to grading and conducted grading across centres.

Where links had been made to conduct the process between centres, aspects that participants found helpful included:

- Co-developing centre policies and processes
- Reassurance that learners were receiving the right grades
- Adopting effective practice and gaining confidence in grading; and
- Implementing a consistent approach to grading across centres.

Participants noted that grading with other centres did not work as well when it increased the time pressure on staff; and lacked coordination and organisation.

Participants' confidence in the external quality assurance processes run by WJEC/the awarding body reportedly varied. Some were concerned that WJEC's processes were:

- Insufficiently rigorous
- Unable to deal with results from schools which were higher or lower than expected.

Others felt that WJEC provided:

- Unclear and inconsistent information
- Limited quality assurance; and
- An inconsistent approach to approving centre assessment policies.

Those who felt more confident in the external quality assurance processes tended to cite:

- Previous experience as a moderator
- Being reassured by the processes' additional scrutiny; and
- Welcoming the specificity and clarity of the supporting materials.

Participants expressed more confidence in the accuracy of the grades they awarded for their own learners than they did in the accuracy of the grades awarded by other centres. The relatively high confidence in the grades awarded by their own centre was largely attributed to the rigour of their grading processes. Participants felt less confident in the grades awarded by other centres due to:

- Speculation about differences in interpreting grading guidance
- Inconsistently rigorous processes; and
- Learners' ability to access past papers online.

1.4.4. Fairness

Participants expressed mixed views about the fairness of the summer 2021 grading process, relative to other years when exams took place. The issue raised most frequently was inconsistency between centres when awarding grades. Greater external quality assurance was said to be needed to increase fairness. Some noted that exams can provide greater consistency than CDGs and can be a valuable learning experience, although others felt that exams were a less fair representation of learners' ability. The publication of past papers (as mentioned elsewhere) was also raised as an issue in relation to fairness, as was the potential tendency of some centre staff to mark down through fear of scrutiny, and the fact that participants could not know how other centres were grading.

To increase the fairness of the grading process, some felt that the pre-pandemic grading approach should be reverted to. Others felt that the following should be made available:

- Unseen papers
- A set timetable for at least some assessments across all centres; and
- More quality assurance and evidence collection.

1.4.5. Impacts

Participant's views were also mixed regarding the manageability of the grading process. Those who felt that the process was unmanageable put this down to the need to implement the process robustly whilst continuing to teach. The manageability of the grading process was also said to have been affected by:

- The lateness of the decision to move to CDGs
- Concerns over managing the quality of grading; and
- The publication of past papers.

The amount of time that participants reported spending on the grading process varied considerably. Nevertheless, most participants said that the grading process impacted on teaching time, and on their personal wellbeing. They linked this to the amount of extra time that grading took, which they said impacted negatively on their work-life balance and their mental and physical health. Other stresses that participants linked to grading included:

- The perceived need to "get it right"
- Pressure within centres to maintain results that were not too dissimilar to results in the centre in previous years; and
- The impact of the process on learners' personal wellbeing.

Little conflict with parents and learners over grades awarded by centres was reported. Participants linked this to the rigour of the process, and clear communication with parents and learners about its requirements. Participants reported mixed views about the impact of grading on learners' progression to further learning and employment. Those who were more positive about this said that they had targeted learning and assessment to support learners' progression. They also noted that learners would do a series of assessments rather than terminal exams when at university or work. Participants who felt that grading could impact on learners' future progression expressed concerns about:

- Learners' loss of schooling
- Limited practical skills due to the reduced time spent on practical activities at centres; and
- Limited experience of exams.

1.4.6. Overall views on the grading process

Regarding what worked well in the grading process, participants' comments mainly reflected:

- The rigour of moderation and standardisation processes
- The collaborative elements of the grading process; and

- The perception that the CDG process resulted in grades which more accurately reflected learners' ability relative to exams.

When reflecting on what worked less well in the grading process, participants again emphasised:

- That new assessment material was not provided
- Tight deadlines
- Limited standardisation and external moderation (although this point was raised as both positive and negative by different participants); and
- The impact of the process on teachers' wellbeing.

Some participants felt that teachers should have been recompensed for additional work/time spent on the CDG process.

1.4.7. Looking ahead

Participant opinions varied regarding their future involvement with GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed. Most of those who said that they would like more involvement with GCSE grading relative to their levels of involvement before the pandemic, felt that teacher assessment should make up a greater proportion of overall grades to increase fairness relative to exams. Conversely, most of those who said that they would like less involvement compared to before the pandemic did so because they felt that exams or external assessments would be fairer to learners as they were more impartial and consistent than CDGs, and more manageable for teachers.

Most participants stated that they would like to see a more equal balance of teacher assessment and exams going forward. Some advocated more collaborative moderation and external verification processes. However, there was some feeling that teacher assessment should be kept to a minimum, and that a largely exam-based system was best.

Suggestions for future quality assurance of teacher assessment included:

- Collaborative internal standardisation and robust data collection
- Sending awarding body representatives out to check work and give advice; and
- Sending samples of work away for marking.