

Gradings without exams – arrangements for the Class of 2021

Assessment arrangements for those due to finish their level 3 studies in 2021 are being finalised at present, to create a system that is deemed to be as fair as possible and to avoid a situation where the grades are felt not to reflect the students' capabilities and efforts.

19 April 2021

Assessment arrangements for those due to finish their level 3 and A level studies in 2021 are being finalised at present. The impact on students, parents and schools is significant as everyone struggles to avoid a repeat of last year when it was felt that students were at the mercy of an algorithm designed to standardise results. The Government carried out a consultation with a view to refining the process and avoiding any use of algorithms or formulae, the outcome is centre assessed grades. It has been decided that for vocational and technical qualifications, that are most like A levels, and used for progression into higher education, the results should be determined using similar arrangements to A levels. Although it is recognised that they also require an internal assessment of occupational competence, that Ofqual will need to consider as well.

The aim in a Covid-dominated year is to create a system that is deemed to be as fair as possible and to avoid a situation where the grades are felt not to reflect the students' capabilities and efforts. This is a huge ask as there will always be a responsibility falling on those implementing the chosen system, which in this case will be the teachers who are tasked with submitting grades for individual students to the exam boards.

The impact of the system on the Higher Education (HE) sector is significant both in terms of timing and quality of data impacting on the selection process for students who are looking to progress to their university of choice.

Centre Awarded Grades

The principle of the Centre Awarded Grades is that nobody knows the students' capabilities better than the teachers who have taught them. They must grade the student based on work that they have done which can include mocks, in-class assessments, past exam papers and papers provided by the exam boards post-announcement, homework and class contributions. There is no prescribed weighting or balance and it is very much down to each centre to provide an acceptable and credible marking rationale that will be checked by the exam board. Inevitably different centres will have taught different amounts of the curriculum based on the resources available and the time taken to set up an effective virtual learning environment. This has been recognised as a potential issue and to avoid unfairness it is not a requirement that the full curriculum is tested. The expectation is that the centre is confident that enough of the curriculum has been covered to enable the grading to be credible and for the student to be able to progress into the next phase of education or employment. As the centre judgements will vary, it is inevitable that universities will have to manage different levels of 'subject readiness' when welcoming students to their first year of study.

Mitigating circumstances

Within the process students are able to put forward mitigating circumstances to their centres before the grades are submitted in June. The consideration of those circumstances will be undertaken by the teachers and centres themselves. It is not expected that there will be a need for 'special consideration' criteria due to the flexibility that is allowed for compiling evidence of work done. Mitigating circumstances are likely to be put forward for work that has already been marked but, which at the time, was not anticipated that it would be used for a formal grading process. If an alternative assessment cannot be sat then mitigating circumstances might be allowed retrospectively.

It is unlikely that anyone would suggest that Covid has not put unprecedented stress on students this year. The anxiety and uncertainty will have had an effect on their well-being and may have had an effect on a students' mental health. Centres will deal with this phenomenon differently. Some may feel that to avoid additional stress they will use data they already have to make a grade assessment. Others will carry on and set work with the students' full knowledge that it will contribute to their forthcoming grade.

Whether anxiety and stress can be considered mitigating factors or be of a level to require reasonable adjustments to be made to forthcoming assessments will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis but a criterion needs to be met that measures the anxiety as significantly greater than the stress and anxiety experienced by their peers. It could reach a level that renders it a disability. If it is accepted as a factor for consideration does this make the student more likely to be vulnerable when they start their first year of higher study? What support needs to be put in place for students starting in a period that is likely to still have some uncertainties attached to it? Schools have a 'Wellbeing for Education Return Programme'. No doubt the Higher Education sector will have in place specific support for enrolling students too.

It is accepted that whilst Covid has restricted all our lives it will have had a disproportionately negative effect on the disadvantaged. Reasonable adjustments will be key in trying to redress some of that balance but even where places are offered at university students may opt for a deferred year in the hope of a more normal experience the next. This reduces the spaces immediately available and whilst some can afford to wait, there may be others that cannot.

Appeals

If students want to challenge their grades and they are intending to start university their appeal will be prioritised. Results are due out in mid-August so there is a relatively small window. The Government is hoping that the arrangements being made this year and advanced preparations that are being undertaken now will reduce the number of challenges centres will receive, but this is a completely unknown factor and it seems likely that students who do not get the grade that they think they should have or need will use the appeal system.

The effects of the exam arrangements may well fall more heavily on schools this summer, but the longer-term effects will undoubtedly be felt by the HE sector for some years to come.

Please do contact us if you would like any further information on this year's level three assessments or if you would like to discuss the legalities of your chosen admissions approach.

Contact



Mark Hickson

Head of Business Development

onlineteaminbox@brownejacobson.com

+44 (0)370 270 6000

Related expertise

Services

School admission services

