

Quality Assurance for the Alternative Certification Model

17 May 2021

Education Scotland's STEM Team ran a series of webinars in April and May to provide support for the quality assurance process for the Alternative Certification Model (ACM). Over 28 secondary science teachers attended these online webinar sessions, representing 169 establishments and 32 local authorities.

The sessions provided teachers with the opportunity to share practice and approaches to ACM. In the course of discussions attendees highlighted a couple of areas where more detail would be helpful.

Education Scotland collated these questions and shared them with SQA colleagues who provided the responses below.

Q. What is the difference between chunking and splitting the paper?

SQA response: There is no difference, the two are synonymous. Centres need to consider the overall level of demand of their assessment and set grade boundaries for grades A and C accordingly.

Q. If there is no predictability in chunked assessment, should schools work within notional cut-off scores?

SQA response: Splitting papers into chunks, for example by topic, can make the assessment easier, since it makes the chunks more predictable, candidates only have to learn limited parts of the course, and the synoptic nature of science assessment is reduced. Actions such as randomising the questions in each chunk so there is integration of a good range of knowledge and skills in each chunk, and integration of knowledge and skills, will help avoid this issue and reduce the need to raise cut-off scores above notional. However, centres may still need to adjust cut-off scores to reflect other issues, such as questions that haven't worked as intended or lenient/harsh marking.

Q. Some pupil cohorts are sitting multiple papers per subject on different days. Is there a case for lowering grade boundaries, if required, to reflect the increased level of challenge this will bring?

SQA response: Grade boundaries are set based on the level of demand of the instrument(s) of assessment and the quality of evidence. Splitting papers can reduce the level of demand, unless steps are taken to avoid making the chunks predictable (see previous response). The fact that a candidate may have a number of assessment chunks in one day is not a reason for reducing the grade boundaries applied in a particular subject. Doing so would mean that a subject would be applying multiple different grade boundaries in one level to reflect that one candidate may have had one assessment chunk in a day, whilst others had two, or three, etc, which would not be appropriate. It is important that the national standards are applied consistently across the country to ensure fairness for all candidates.

Q. What happens if a pupil cohort significantly underperforms due to COVID-related disruption – should schools adjust grade boundaries to bring results in line with previous attainment levels?

SQA response: Grade boundaries are set based on the level of demand of the assessment instrument. The cut off scores must be based on the quality of evidence, so the national standard required for grade A and grade C is consistent across the country, thus ensuring fairness for all candidates. Previous data can be used as a sense check, but not to shape provisional results.

Q. What happens if pupil/s do not finish all the course due to COVID-related disruption? How would this be dealt with/reflected in grade boundaries?

SQA response: The assessment should cover the entire course, as exemplified in the SQA 2021 resource and previous papers. The national standard required for grade A and grade C must be

consistent across the country thus ensuring fairness for all candidates. Centres have until 25 June to ensure they have a robust evidence base for every provisional result.

By exception, as mentioned in the communication from the NQ 2021 group in relation to disruption to learning (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/97701.html>) on 10 May 2021, for candidates who have completed the course but whose evidence base is incomplete it will be possible to complete assessments and enter provisional results on 3 September. Guidance about this exceptional provision is in development.

Q. How can we ensure consistency of grading across Scotland if some pupils are sitting the SQA 2020 assessment in its entirety in one day, whilst others are doing the same assessment over three sittings?

SQA response: The Alternative Certification Model (ACM) allows centres considerable flexibility in how they gather assessment evidence this session. The essential thing is that grade boundaries are consistent with the national standards and these are likely to vary from centre to centre depending on the assessment, how it is administered, and how the marking instructions are applied. Centres can choose how they use the SQA 2020 assessment, in its entirety, in part, with adaptations or not at all.

Q. The Environmental Science guidelines state that grade boundaries have to be adjusted (by 7%) if assessment is chunked. However, there is no mention of this in the N5 or Higher Geography guidelines. Is there a reason why grade boundary advice differs between subjects?

SQA response: The example referred to for Environmental Science is actually one where the assessment has insufficient grade A marks, which means the grade boundaries would need to be raised.

Q. Scaling of the papers - for some schools and subjects the sciences assignment would have a positive impact on the final grading. Given the assignment is not included this year, should scaling/grade boundaries be adjusted to reflect this?

SQA response: No, the assignment was removed for this session based on feedback from teachers to the consultation SQA carried out in August 2020 on modifications to courses. The key evidence for sciences is set out in the subject-specific guidance and centres should ensure that the assessment of evidence for provisional results is consistent with the national standard.

Q. Does the SQA plan to normalise data at a national level after grades have been submitted? There is a danger of normalising data twice if both SQA and schools do this?

SQA response: SQA will not adjust provisional results. There will be admin checks only after 25 June.

Q. What happens if pupil/s are absent due to COVID and miss key assessments? How should this be dealt with – sit at a later date with same paper?

SQA response: Centres have the flexibility to use different assessment evidence for different candidates. It is probably best not to use identical assessments in this situation. Centres have until 25 June to ensure they have a robust evidence base for every provisional result. By exception, as mentioned in the communication from the NQ 2021 group in relation to disruption to learning (<https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/97701.html>) on 10 May 2021, for candidates who have completed the course but whose evidence base is incomplete it will be possible to complete assessments and enter provisional results on 3 September.

Q. What further support and advice will SQA and SQA appointees provide through May/June? Will they be able to provide clarifications on the points above for example when liaising with schools?

SQA response: SQA continues to respond to all enquiries received. As a result of the national quality assurance exercise, centres will receive individual feedback reports. All centres will have access to key messages reports.