Cambridge Assessment International Education

Guidance about avoiding bias in Cambridge International qualifications in June 2020

Information for heads of centre, heads of department and teachers on objectivity in predicting grades and deciding on rank orders

The importance of objectivity

In these unprecedented circumstances, schools are best placed to judge the likely performance of their students if teaching and learning, and exams, had continued as planned. Centres usually know their students well and will have regularly assessed their performance throughout the course of study.

We are providing the following extra information on objectivity in predicting grades and deciding on rank orders to help schools play their role in ensuring this year's results are as fair as possible. This is based on existing research and analysis about how centres can assess candidates as objectively as possible.

Objectivity in grading and ranking decisions

Each predicted grade should be a holistic professional judgement, balancing different sources of evidence and data. It is important that the centre's predicted grades and rank order judgements are objective; they should only take account of existing records and available evidence of a student's knowledge, skills and abilities in relation to the subject.

This evidence should inform teachers' professional judgements about each candidate's likely performance at the time of the exam. Other factors should not affect this judgement, including characteristics such as a candidate's gender, race, religion/belief or disability. Similarly, judgements should not be affected by a candidate's behaviour (both good and poor), character, appearance or social background, or the performance of their siblings.

Unconscious effects on objectivity

To avoid unconscious bias, teachers are urged to reflect on and question whether they may have any preconceptions about each student's performance and whether their perception of the evidence might be affected by any irrelevant factors. Teachers should be aware of:

- confirmation bias, for example noticing only evidence about a candidate that fits with pre-existing views about them
- masking or halo effects, for example a particular view about an aspect of a candidate that hides, or overly accentuates, their actual knowledge, skills and abilities
- recency effects, for example giving undue weight to the most recent interaction with a candidate or the most recent piece of work done by a candidate
- primacy effects, for example giving undue weight to 'first impressions' of a candidate
- selective perceptions, for example giving undue weight to a candidate's performance on a particular part of the content of the syllabus, rather than considering performance across the whole syllabus for Cambridge IGCSE, O Level, International AS & A level, Pre-U and IPQ
- contrast effects, for example over- or under-estimating a candidate's likely performance having first considered a large number of students who are all working at a different standard.

Information from previous data

The effects described above may not be consistently seen across different centres or individuals. To understand more about possible effects in a particular centre, a centre could look back at previous years' data, for example, over the past two to five years, where this is available. Considering data in this way is unlikely to identify all possible effects and may prove inconclusive. Contextual information is likely be important in considering what weight to give any such data. For example, significant personnel changes may mean that effects in previous years may not be assumed to carry forward, or may reduce the benefits of aggregating data between different years.

A centre could use such data to identify whether there may be any indications of systematic under- or over-prediction for different groups of students, for example, those from particular ethnic, social or religious groups. For example, a centre may find that it has routinely under-estimated forecast Cambridge International A Level maths grades compared to grades actually achieved for students from particular groups; or routinely over-estimated forecast Cambridge IGCSE grades compared to grades actually achieved for students from particular groups. The centre could use any such findings as it checks whether its proposed predicted grades for June 2020 might have been influenced by preconceptions or irrelevant factors.

In doing any such analysis, centres should be aware of and take into account contextual factors. Awareness of the limitations of data and the context in which it was generated may help centres to consider which data is relevant, which is not, and what conclusions may and may not be supported.

Reviewing judgements

Having considered possible unconscious effects on objectivity and any information from available data from previous years, centres are asked to use this information to reflect carefully on their predicted grades and rank orders. Dialogue between heads of departments, teachers and the head of centre can support such reflection and review.

Where any possible unconscious effects, or previous systemic under- or over-prediction for particular groups, have been identified, careful consideration would be needed to ensure, for example, that this was not over-compensated for.

Nonetheless, analysing information, reflection and dialogue as outlined above could help a centre to assure itself that it has effectively fulfilled its duties to avoid discrimination, and to assure itself that it has maximised objectivity and fairness in the judgements that it has made.