

Setting and aligning standards in the June 2021 series

Introduction and background

The global pandemic of the Covid-19 virus continues to affect teaching, learning and assessment, and the lives of teachers, students and their families. We continue to work to manage its impact on our June 2021 exam series.

We are completely focused on doing everything we can to support schools and students. Our priorities are keeping students and school staff safe, and helping students to progress with their education in the fairest way possible.

In this document, we explain how we will set and align standards in a fair way for exams (by far the largest proportion of student entries in June 2021) and for school assessment.

Students taking Cambridge International exams will not be systematically advantaged or disadvantaged compared to students whose grades are determined using our school assessment grades process or the process used by schools in England for similar qualifications. The route a student takes in June 2021 will not determine how hard it is to achieve good grades.

As we have said previously, we have adapted our assessment significantly for the June 2021 series. Our approach is:

1. to run exams¹ where safe and permitted, because exams are the most reliable way to assess students
2. to introduce extra temporary measures - such as adjustments, exemptions and expanded special considerations - into our exam requirements, so as many students as possible can access the exams
3. to accept school assessments in the small number of countries, or regions within countries, where directives from national or local authorities mean that exams cannot go ahead, so students can progress to the next stage in their education or employment without delay.

The measures outlined here will allow the greatest number of our students to submit work for assessment in June 2021. This means they will receive results which are as fair as possible given the disruption of the pandemic and the changes to assessment models used for similar qualifications issued by other exam boards.

How we will set standards for exam grades and align them with school-assessed grades in June 2021

Our usual approach to grading exams uses a variety of statistical and judgemental methods. These methods help us maintain the awarding standard from a previous exam series, usually the exam series the previous year.

¹ In this document we use the term exams to mean the range of assessment methods that we usually use, including not only timetabled written exams but also practical assessments, coursework etc.

One method is using 'benchmark centres' - schools with large and stable numbers of entries. For each syllabus, we identify which centres meet our criteria to be considered as benchmark centres. We expect that the grades awarded to a large group of benchmark centres, considered as a whole, will remain stable from year to year under normal circumstances.

For June 2021, our grading process will look back to the last June exam series, which was June 2019. We will identify a set of benchmark centres from the centres submitting school-assessed grades. Once we have collected their school-assessed grades from the benchmark centres, we will be able to see how much the standard has moved since June 2019 in the countries and regions where school-assessed grades are to be awarded, including in England.

Having determined how much the standard has moved, we will set grade thresholds for our exams which permit the same level of movement compared to June 2019.

In this way, **students taking our examinations will not be systematically advantaged or disadvantaged compared to those whose grades are determined using school-assessment.**

Understanding the standard of school-assessed grades

In June 2020 we (and all other exam boards offering similar qualifications) issued predicted grades (a form of school-assessed grades). The final grades issued rose more overall than they would have if examinations had taken place. We explained why this happens in an [article on our website](#).

This rise was uneven between schools. It **is**, however, meaningful to speak of an *average standard of school-assessed grades* across a large number of schools and subjects. This average standard of predicted grades in the June 2020 series was more generous than the standard of previous exam series. We could measure the extent of that generosity in our exams, and know it was similar to the generosity of grades awarded in the UK.

We anticipate that school-assessed grades will, on average, be more generous in June 2021 than exams prior to the pandemic - just as they were in the June 2020 series, and probably to a similar extent. Understanding the extent of generosity means **we can adjust standards of exam grades to make sure it is not systemically harder or easier for students to achieve good grades in June 2021.**

Maintaining standards year on year, and aligning with standards in England

We commit in our Code of Practice to aligning our awarding standards to those of equivalent qualifications in England. Many of our candidates will use their grades to apply for courses in competition with people who have grades from equivalent qualifications. Aligning awarding standards ensures that the competition will be fair, without giving an unfair advantage or disadvantage to Cambridge candidates.

We also commit in our Code of Practice to maintain awarding standards from one year to the next. There are good reasons for this commitment, too. For example, if the standard becomes more generous, it means grades are awarded for work which, in a previous year, would have received a lower grade. This disadvantages candidates from previous years, who are counting on us to protect the value of their grades. Our normal grading processes are therefore designed to prevent this.

These two commitments are not normally in tension. Of course, this is not a normal year, and neither was 2020. In the June 2021 series, we are offering exams in most countries, and equivalent qualifications taken in England will be based on school assessment. So in June 2021 it is necessary, and consistent with our Code

of Practice², that we align the awarding standards of our examinations to reflect the amount of change in school-assessed grades.

Why our first choice for assessing students is exams

Exams are the most reliable method we have of assessing students. Different factors make this so:

Stages of the assessment process	How we make sure exams are reliable
The tasks given to candidates	All students are given the same questions to answer. Where there is a choice of questions, we make sure they are of the same level of difficulty.
Equal sampling of syllabus content and assessment objectives	The questions that are given to students sample the assessment objectives and the syllabus content in a controlled way.
Exam conditions	The conditions under which students answer the questions are carefully controlled to avoid malpractice.
Marking	Each student's work is marked by experienced examiners who have no connection with the student and are trained to mark consistently and fairly.
Assigning a grade	Grades are awarded to candidates using grade thresholds which are determined by a variety of statistical and judgemental methods. The same grade thresholds are applied to all students.

By offering exams where they can take place, and school-assessed grades in the small number of countries and regions where they cannot, we are able to provide the best form of assessment possible in the many different circumstances of the pandemic. This will allow the greatest number of our students to submit work for assessment in June 2021, receive results and progress with their education and their lives.

² The wording of our Code of Practice commitment 4.3(a) indicates that aligning with equivalent qualifications in England takes priority over maintaining the awarding standard from one year to the next.