

Guidance about avoiding bias in determining school-assessed grades in June 2021

Information for heads of centre, heads of department and teachers on objectivity in determining grades

The importance of objectivity

In these unprecedented circumstances, if exams cannot take place, schools are best placed to judge the level of performance demonstrated by their students in work that they have done.

In June 2020, we asked schools to send us predicted grades based on the centre's judgement of what the candidate would have achieved had the exams taken place – a judgement based on potential. In June 2021, the school-assessed grades will be based on **actual achievement in three substantial pieces of work**.

We are providing the following extra information on objectivity in making a holistic judgement about how best to equate the grade given to each of the three substantial pieces of work or evidence to a single final grade for each candidate. This information is based on existing research and analysis about how centres can assess candidates as objectively as possible.

Objectivity in determining grades from students' pieces of evidence

Each final grade should be a holistic professional judgement, balancing the level of performance seen in the three pieces of evidence used for each candidate. It is important that the centre's judgements are objective; they should only take account of the three pieces of evidence of a student's knowledge, skills and abilities in relation to the subject. This evidence should form the basis for teachers' professional judgements about each candidate's level of performance. 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, parental opinions or the knowledge of grades needed to meet a university offer.

Unconscious effects on objectivity

Without always realising it, everyone holds unconscious beliefs about others. These can be based on things like social factors or identities of others, as detailed above. There is a risk that objective judgements can be affected by unconscious beliefs and other types of bias.

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, Cambridge Pre-U and IPQ
- contrast effects, for example over- or underestimating a candidate's likely performance having first considered a large number of students who are all working at a different standard.
- exception effects, for example, under- or over-grading a student's performance if it is significantly out of line with (above or below) other students in that centre
- conformity bias, for example, placing undue weight on the opinions of others where these are not necessarily supported by the evidence
- affinity bias, having a more favourable impression of a student's performance because the student or their qualities/attributes are relatable or similar to one's own qualities or attributes


This is not an exhaustive list but is designed to raise awareness of the main biases that could negatively impact on the quality of centre judgements.

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 to 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 generosity or severity 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 been more generous in school-assessed grades for Cambridge International A Level maths compared to grades actually achieved for students from particular groups; or routinely been more generous in school-assessed grades for Cambridge IGCSE History compared to grades actually achieved for students from particular groups. The centre could use any such findings as it checks whether its proposed school-assessed grades for June 2021 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 final grades. Dialogue between heads of departments, teachers and the head of centre can support such reflection and review. Where any possible unconscious effects, or previous under- or over-prediction



in forecast grades for particular groups have been identified, careful consideration would be needed to ensure, for example, that this was not overcompensated 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.

Conclusion

Centre judgements should be determined by the specific performance of each student in the three pieces of evidence selected. Following the steps outlined in this document can help a centre assure itself that it has maximised objectivity and avoided bias in the judgements that it has made.