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Reflections on teacher assessment after the 2021 Teacher Assessed Grades process in England

Conference Abstract

Sylvia Vitello

Tony Leech

Author contact details:

Sylvia Vitello & Tony Leech
Assessment Research and Development
Research Division
Shaftesbury Road
Cambridge
CB2 8EA
UK

sylvia.vitello@cambridge.org
anthony.leech@ cambridge.org
https://www.cambridge.org/

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Greater use of high stakes teacher assessment is being increasingly considered as an alternative to exams. This has been given further impetus by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, which in England saw 2020 and 2021 exams replaced with teacher assessment. In 2021, regulation allowed schools substantial latitude to determine candidate grades, known as teacher-assessed grades (TAGs) from a broad variety of available evidence. Unlike in 2020, when an algorithmic approach to the determination of grades was instituted (though eventually replaced with candidates being awarded teacher-assessed grades after public disquiet with the algorithm), in 2021 the process was based on teacher-assessed grades from the beginning. Teachers had to determine grades on the basis of evidence of candidate performance on assessments, though they could choose what these were and how many to use (in accordance with broad guidance). Samples of these sets of evidence were looked at by exam boards for the purpose of quality assurance.

Holt-White & Cullinane (2021) reported the results of a poll of 3,221 teachers into the materials used to assess students that year and teachers' views on the 2021 teacher-assessed grades process, in the context of its implications specifically for A level results and university access. The survey found that the teachers mostly used 3 or 4 assessments. Most teachers indicated they were trying to use the most objective evidence of student performance they had available. 96% of polled teachers said they used assessments carried out under exam conditions, with 80% of teachers using assessments based on past papers. Teacher-written assessments, classwork and homework were used by considerably less than half of teachers. Teachers seemed to prefer to use assessments that were as close as possible to exams. The authors also point to significant pressures on teachers as a consequence of having had the "responsibility" for grades, as well as due to the greater workload requirements.

The work reported here goes further by investigating actual samples of evidence submitted to the OCR exam board for quality assurance in English language and maths GCSE qualifications (taken generally by 16-year-olds). By rule, each qualification sample needed to include the work of five candidates, who were selected by OCR to include a candidate receiving the highest grade of those awarded at that school and one receiving the lowest. The schools were chosen for sampling on the basis of a process whereby various risk factors such as previous malpractice increased the likelihood of being chosen, though there was also a random element. This evidence included scanned copies or images of candidate assessment scripts, as well as, for many schools, documents setting out the teachers' rationales for how grades had been arrived at from this evidence. Maths evidence came from 26 schools and English language from 13.

There were some broad similarities between the approaches of the schools analysed, across both English and maths samples. All schools gathered multiple pieces of assessment evidence to inform their TAG decisions, almost all of which resembled GCSE exam questions and were (or appeared to be) based on OCR's assessment materials; many schools used at least one assessment that took the form of a full exam paper. Most schools made little use of other materials. All schools' assessments covered a broad range of the GCSE content, with most covering all assessment objectives. In this respect, findings reflect those of Holt-White & Cullinane. However, there was also variation between schools in terms of the specific types of evidence used, the volume thereof, how this evidence was marked and/or graded, and how different types of evidence were prioritised, and in English language there was more evidence of non-standard assessments including additional writing tasks.

We consider the wider implications of the potential greater use of high stakes teacher assessment. Our analysis questions the extent to which (in non-emergency situations) teachers would welcome the assumption of responsibilities that generally sit with exam boards. It also highlights the extent to which, despite the freedoms provided in 2021, teachers mostly (where possible given their students' situations in terms of access to school, and health) used evidence from exam-style assessments carried out largely in exam conditions. This suggests they generally appreciate the ways these assessments are constructed in order to be standardised and see them as fair. Some potential advantages of continuous teacher assessment in terms of presenting a more rounded view of a candidate's ability than their performance on a particular day, and potentially reducing candidate anxiety, are important. However, the continuing value of standardised and fair assessments ought not to be understated. We consider implications of these findings for designing high stakes teacher assessment in future, non-emergency situations to be practicable from the teacher perspective and to ensure rigour and comparability of standards.

Reference

Holt-White, E., & Cullinane, C. (2021). *A Levels and University Access 2021. Research Brief*. Sutton Trust.