



**Cambridge  
Assessment**

# Formal definitions of assessment types

*Reforms to qualifications: Factsheet 1*

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## Introduction

The educational system in England is undergoing major reform by the Department for Education (DfE) and the national regulator, Ofqual. Reforms are underway for both vocational and academic qualifications. This factsheet provides definitions of types of assessment that are mentioned in the reforms. The aim is to clarify the distinction between external/internal versus exam/non-exam assessment. It is important to note that the DfE and Ofqual use certain terms in ways that differ from their more common usage in everyday language.

The definitions are taken from official documents produced by the DfE or Ofqual.

## External assessment versus internal assessment

### External assessment

*“External assessment is a form of assessment in which question papers, assignments and tasks are specified by the awarding organisation, then taken under specified conditions (including details of supervision and duration) and marking or assessment judgements are made by the awarding organisation. It does not include moderation or verification of centre-based assessment undertaken by an awarding organisation” (DfE 2015, p.18).*

The DfE’s definition of external assessment explicitly concerns the setting and marking process of an assessment. It does not specify the type of task. This distinction is important because external assessments are often associated with written, time-bound examinations (Dufaux, 2012). The DfE has suggested several types of assessment tasks for vocational qualifications that can be implemented as external assessment:

*“External assessment need not be limited to paper or on-screen tests. It may include digital recordings of students, external examiners viewing and assessing artefacts made by students, assessed performance at an external assessment centre, vivas or other effective means made possible by developing technologies” (DfE 2015, p.18).*

### Internal assessment

If any of the conditions of external assessment are not met, then the assessment is classified as internal assessment.

## Exam versus non-exam assessment

### Exam

Exams are defined as tasks that are *“taken by all students at once, under formal supervision, and are set and marked by exam boards” (Ofqual 2014, p.10).*

### Non-exam assessment

If any of the conditions of exams are not met, then the assessment is classified as a non-exam assessment:

*“The term ‘non-exam assessment’ covers a range of different forms of assessment. Non-exam assessments are not necessarily ‘internally’ or teacher-marked nor undertaken over an extended period of time. A performance may, for example, be undertaken under timed conditions and marked by a visiting exam board assessor, but because not all students will be assessed simultaneously it does not fall within our definition of ‘assessment by exam’” (Ofqual 2014, p.10).*

“Endorsements” are one particular example of a non-exam assessment that is assessed by teachers (i.e., internally), but unlike other non-exam assessment, does not contribute towards the final grade, and is reported separately on the candidate’s qualification certificate. The reformed A level sciences, and GCSE English Language all have an endorsement.

The practical endorsement for A level sciences, for example, is defined as a non-exam assessment because “*a learner may demonstrate the competencies in any practical activity undertaken as part of that assessment throughout the course of study. Learners may undertake practical activities in groups*” (Ofqual 2016, p. 15).

### Unifying external/internal and exam/non-exam assessment

Table 1 shows how all assessments can be categorised in terms of their externality and exam format. The combination of these two features produces three types of assessment. Non-exam assessments can either be external or internal. In contrast, exams are always external because they are (by Ofqual’s definition) set and marked by awarding bodies.

*Table 1: Types of assessment: combinations of externality and exam format*

Externality	Exam	
	Exam	Non-exam
External	External exam	External non-exam
Internal	n/a	Internal non-exam

### References

DfE (2015). *Technical awards for 14 to 16 year olds. 2017 and 2018 performance tables: technical guidance for awarding organisations*. England: Department for Education.

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