

# A guide to what happened with Vocational and Technical Qualifications in summer 2020

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In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown led to the closing of schools across the United Kingdom (UK), and to the cancellation of exams and assessments in England that were due to take place in the summer. The approach taken for GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and A Levels was widely documented in the media. What Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs) did was not the same as GCSEs and A Levels and was not covered in the media as widely. The different approach is because the structure and assessments of VTQs are very different from GCSEs and A Levels, while the approach also had to account for differences between different VTQs. While there may not have been as much coverage in the media for these qualifications, many learners sit VTQ assessments each year, where summer 2020 was due to be no different.

## What are Vocational and Technical Qualifications?

VTQs cover a wide range of qualifications at different levels. In this article, we will concentrate on VTQs typically taken in schools and colleges that are usually sat by 14–18 year olds (from entry level to Level 3), similar to learners who normally take GCSEs and A Levels. Over 4 million of these VTQs were awarded in 2019/20 (Vocational and Technical Qualifications Landscape, n.d.) in a diverse range of subject groups such as: Arts, Media and Publishing; Construction, Planning and the Built Environment; and Health, Public Services and Care. Qualifications available include Cambridge Nationals, Cambridge Technicals and BTECs. Furthermore, analyses using data from the National Pupil Database from 2016/17 found that at Key Stage 4 (14–16 year olds) and Key Stage 5 (16–18 year olds) over 50 per cent of learners were taking at least some VTQs as part of their education course. Of learners taking Key Stage 5 Level 3 qualifications (the same level as A Levels), 24.9 per cent of learners were taking only vocational qualifications (Vidal Rodeiro & Vitello, 2020). Learners can use VTQs to enter the next stage of education, apprenticeships or employment (Department for Education, 2017).

## Was the approach to VTQs the same as A Levels and GCSEs?

How General Qualifications (GQs) results were calculated did not differ between awarding organisations as the process was set out by the national regulator, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual, 2020d; Ofqual 2020e), so that all learners' results were calculated in the same way. This approach meant that a learner would not have a different result depending on the awarding organisation that provided it. However, the breadth and diversity of VTQs meant that such a generalised approach was unfeasible (Ofqual, 2020b). What works for one type of qualification offered by a

particular awarding organisation would not necessarily work for another, either due to the purpose, design and delivery of the qualification, or due to availability of assessment evidence (Ofqual, 2020b). In this vein, the regulator produced an Extraordinary Regulatory Framework (ERF) for VTQs, with the aim to ensure as much consistency in approach as possible (Ofqual, 2020c). This meant that the approach used for VTQs was based on the same underlying principles, even though different approaches were used for different qualifications.

The approach for VTQs included three options: calculate, adapt, and delay. The options that were used for a qualification depended on the type and purpose of the qualification.

## Calculate

If a qualification was used for progression to further or higher education (sharing design features with GCSEs and A Levels), awarding organisations had to make sure a result was calculated in the absence of the learner being able to take assessments (Ofqual, 2020a), referred to here as a “calculated result”. Likewise, awarding organisations needed to consider providing a calculated result first if the qualification was said to have a “mixed purpose” whose primary purpose was further or higher education. For these mixed purpose qualifications, awarding organisations were required by the regulator to consider how appropriate a calculated result would be, and if it was not appropriate, to then consider adapting the assessments (Ofqual, 2020a).

### What evidence was used to calculate results?

For qualifications where awarding organisations needed to provide a calculated result in the absence of the learner taking the assessment, the method of calculation needed to be based on multiple sources of evidence potentially available to awarding organisations, as laid out in the ERF. The ERF provided information on what type of evidence was suitable to use in calculating results and the weight that should be given to certain types of evidence. Awarding organisations could then research, develop and implement a process to calculate results using such evidence, which was submitted to Ofqual and kept under review. While some of the sources of evidence were similar to those of GCSEs and A Levels, some sources of evidence were particular to VTQs, which made it likely that a different approach could be used.

Figure 1 summarises the evidence available to awarding organisations in producing calculated results that was provided in the ERF. The green boxes detail the type of evidence that could have been used while the orange boxes describe the weight such evidence should have been given and what that weight depended on. The purple boxes describe how that evidence could have been used, including whether it could have been used to calculate a result, or whether it could be used to check the calculated result, or provide additional information to add context to a calculated result or set of calculated results. One piece of evidence might have been used to calculate the whole result, or it might have been used in conjunction with other pieces of evidence that were combined to produce a calculated result.

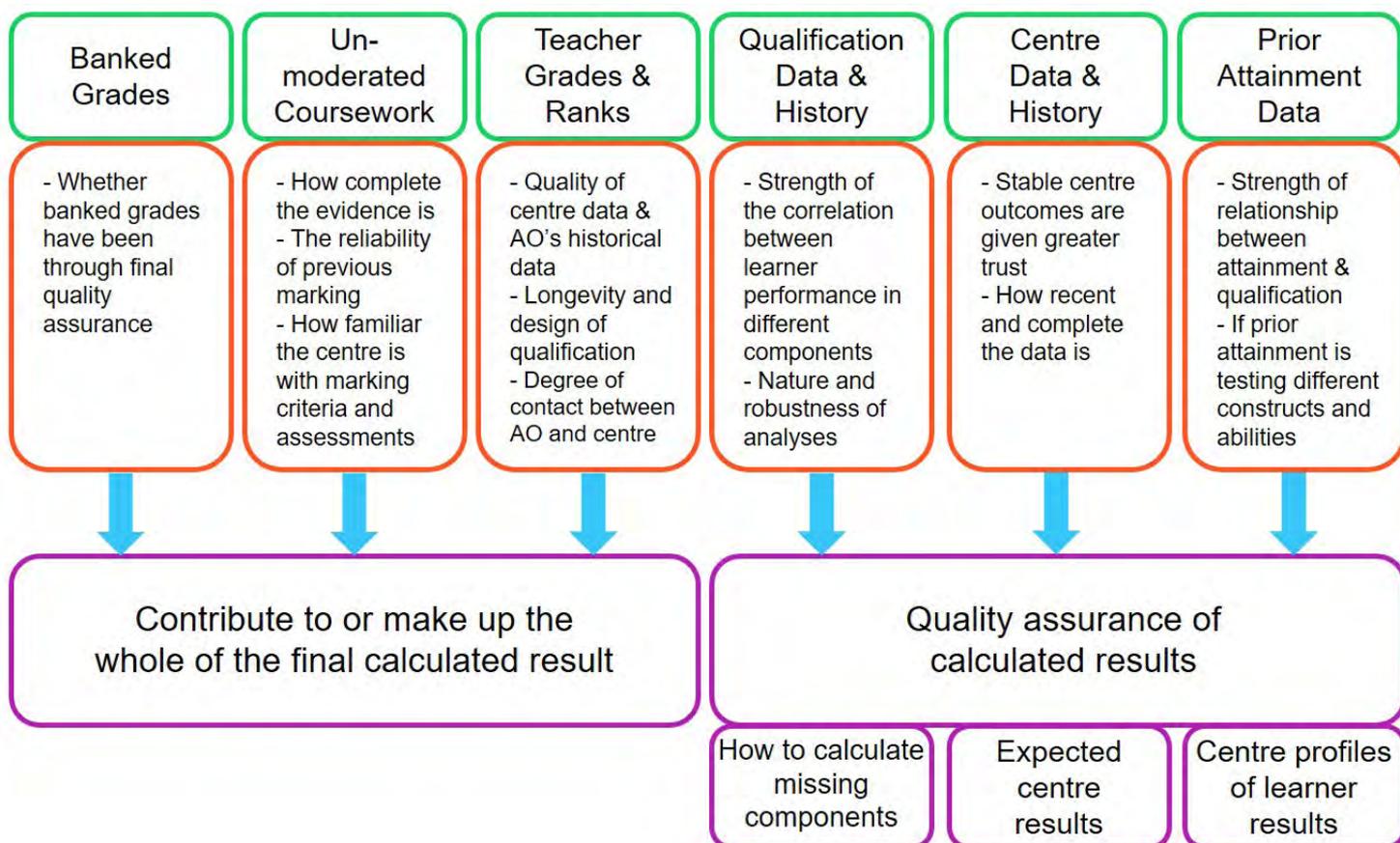


Figure 1: Illustration of the available evidence sources from Ofqual ERF that were available for awarding organisations (Ofqual, 2020c). Green boxes represent the type of evidence. Orange boxes represent what factors affect the weight to be placed on that evidence. Purple boxes represent how such evidence could have been used in producing calculated grades.

### How did the evidence available for calculating results differ from A Levels and GCSEs?

There were some significant differences in the types of evidence that were available to VTQs compared to GCSEs and A Levels to calculate grades. Essentially, VTQs had more evidence of the work of individual candidates potentially available, though this could depend on the qualification or individual learners.

Firstly, many VTQs do not consist solely of terminal assessments or exams at the end of the course, known as a linear qualification. Instead, each component can be sat when learners are ready (for example, at scheduled sittings) throughout the period of study; this is known as a modular qualification. Modular VTQs mean that at any point in time, a number of learners will have already completed some assessment components before the end of the course and will have been awarded a mark that will eventually contribute to their final grade. These are referred to as banked components or grades. In this scenario, awarding organisations had some knowledge of these learners' performance in that subject and qualification, something that was not available to GQs due to their linear nature. Depending on how results were calculated and what was most appropriate for the qualification, awarding organisations may have used banked grades to estimate missing components that could then contribute to the qualification or contribute to calculating the qualification result in conjunction with other evidence. When available, banked grades were considered the strongest evidence available to awarding organisations for calculating

results and were given the highest degree of trust (Ofqual, 2020c). This is because banked component grades contribute to the final grade having been subject to standard (pre-COVID-19) quality assurance processes. However, not all learners have banked component grades, as this was dependent on the delivery model of the school or college, or learner. Therefore, it was likely that banked component grade evidence was available for some learners, but not others.

Further to evidence from banked grades, data about the functioning of the qualification could be used to determine whether it was reasonable to calculate results for missing components (where there was enough evidence) and for quality assurance (Ofqual, 2020c). In this instance, an important consideration about the weight to give banked grades was whether there was (historically) a strong correlation between outcomes on one component and other components within the qualification.

Another source of evidence available for some VTQs was any submitted internal assessment (Ofqual, 2020c), also known as un-moderated coursework or non-exam assessment (NEA). Some schools or colleges had submitted work but, because of COVID-19, the work had not been subject to standard quality assurance such as moderation. Without moderation of submitted coursework, the grade assigned by the centre may not have been the same as the grade that would have been given by the awarding organisation. To use this evidence, awarding organisations had to have a high degree of trust in the marking reliability of the centre and confidence that processes such as moderation would not change grades. This meant that many awarding organisations did not use this type of evidence to calculate results.

## **Did VTQs use some of the same types of evidence as A Levels and GCSEs?**

VTQs could also use some of the same types of evidence that were available to GCSEs and A Levels for calculating grades. One of the primary sources was Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) which provided the learners' likely performance estimated by schools and colleges (Ofqual, 2020c). CAGs from a college or school provided a judgement about the result that each learner was most likely to achieve. This grade might have been for the qualification as a whole or for individual components. As well as a grade, some awarding organisations may have asked for schools and colleges to also include a rank order of learners at each grade. For VTQs, the CAGs received from schools and colleges were subject to quality assurance by the awarding organisation. This may have been done statistically, for instance by comparing grades to additional evidence such as school achievement history, or by using a more qualitative approach by asking for additional evidence from schools and colleges. This additional evidence allowed awarding organisations to ensure that the schools and colleges had considered appropriate evidence when assigning the CAGs.

The ERF stated that when using such evidence, important factors to consider included the information schools and colleges had on learners (such as data from internal assessments), how modular the qualification was, how long the qualification had been available to learners, and the amount of contact the awarding organisation had with the school or college. In addition, the awarding organisation needed to consider whether the historical data it had could provide information on the accuracy of the grades (Ofqual, 2020c). How this type of evidence was used and the weight it carried may have been

different from GCSEs and A Levels, because schools, colleges and awarding organisations also potentially had additional types of current assessment evidence available such as unmoderated coursework or banked grades (Ofqual, 2020c).

As well as estimated performance from schools and colleges, other types of evidence that could provide additional information and context were also available to awarding organisations. While GQs used similar types of evidence, how this evidence was used may have differed for VTQs. Firstly, data on a school or college's historical performance on the qualification, for example how stable outcomes were and how well a school or college had performed, could be considered (Ofqual, 2020c). This could be used for quality assurance, framing expectations of centre level results, or for colleges and schools as a starting point when providing information to awarding organisations. Next, prior attainment data could be considered by awarding organisations. Such data could be how well a cohort did at Key Stage 2 (10–11 year olds) or the mean GCSE (15–16 year olds) scores of a cohort, as well as data on other relevant qualifications. For the prior attainment data, awarding organisations were asked to particularly consider how predictive prior attainment was of qualification outcomes. This is because VTQs have a more practical nature and can be designed to address different skills and constructs. Where appropriate, this evidence could have been used for looking at college and school profiles of learners' results or for quality assurances but could not be used for directly calculating learner results.

### **How was the evidence used to calculate results?**

The variation in qualifications offered by different awarding organisations meant that unlike GCSEs and A Levels, there was also variation in how results were calculated, including whether they were calculated at the qualification or component level. The regulator considered and commented on how each qualification from the different awarding organisations was to be used to calculate results that met their criteria. This meant that different boards had to investigate and test approaches that were suitable for their qualifications (and deliverable within the timeframe). The outcome was that learners sitting different types of qualifications may have had their grades calculated in a different way, but in a way that was most appropriate for their qualification.

For example, if a learner did not have any grades banked, a result might have been calculated using CAGs. The awarding organisation may then have quality assured this by looking at the grade and any other grades in the context of a centre's results history, in order to ensure it was reasonable. This does not necessarily mean they would have changed the grade, as the context of other evidence and the weight they were given could have also been considered. An alternative for when a learner had no banked grades may have been to award a CAG after asking their school or college to provide evidence of how CAGs were awarded.

Another example is if a learner did have banked grades, a result may have been calculated solely based on this evidence, or it may have been combined with evidence from CAGs. The awarding organisation may then have looked at qualification data and history in terms of the relationship between different components to ensure it was fair to calculate grades for missing units using banked grades.

Due to the varied approaches used to calculate results for different qualifications, there is not a single summary of how these sources of evidence were used. Awarding organisations

produced their own communications detailing how results were calculated so that learners, schools and colleges, and the public could gain an understanding for individual qualifications.

## **Did the late decision to award GCSEs and A Levels based on CAGs affect VTQs?**

In August 2020, after A Level results had been released, the method for awarding GCSEs and A Levels was revised. Statistical standardisation of CAGs to calculate results was removed as the default method, and learners were awarded either their CAG or their calculated result, whichever was higher (GOV.UK, 2020d). This decision for GQs had implications for some VTQ calculated results (GOV.UK, 2020c). It was important that VTQ learners would not be disadvantaged in comparison to GCSE and A Level learners. This meant that soon after the decision on GQs was made and depending on how grades were calculated and the purpose of qualifications (for example, whether learners took VTQs alongside GQs), some VTQ qualifications changed their approach to remain consistent with the GQ principle. Not all awarding organisations changed their approach, particularly where calculated results were based on banked grades, which remained a strong piece of evidence (GOV.UK, 2020a). That some qualifications changed their approach and others did not largely reflects the diversity in the initial approaches that was necessary for the different qualifications.

## **Adapt**

For VTQs that were used to show occupational competence or provide a licence to practice, the awarding organisations needed to base results on the level of attainment demonstrated in an adapted assessment (Ofqual, 2020a). Awarding organisations also considered an adapted assessment as a starting point if the qualification was said to have a mixed purpose whose primary purpose was occupational competence (Ofqual, 2020a).

Adaptations could be made throughout the process, including the delivery, the assessment methods, the invigilation and quality assurance. Delivery of assessments could be adapted by ensuring tests could be taken online, or, for more practical scenarios previously face to face, assessments could be done remotely. Work experience or placements could also be adapted (for example by being shortened), or waived. Assessment methods could also be adapted, for example a practical simulation or discussion could be used instead of an observation or demonstration. Invigilation and quality assurances such as standardisation could also be adapted by moving online. An awarding organisation might have taken into consideration any relevant professional or sector body approach to how assessments were to be adapted, as particular professional or sector bodies may have been interested in maintaining consistency across qualifications awarded by different awarding organisations (Ofqual, 2020c).

Adapted assessments had to remain reliable, be able to maintain standards and be deliverable. It was particularly important to ensure none of the adaptations had an effect on the coverage of key areas of the construct that may have risked the validity of the qualification; if this could not be ensured then the assessments had to be delayed (Ofqual, 2020c). For professional qualifications or those that provide a licence to practice, it

was important to balance maintaining validity of the qualification while maximising the number of results awarded, though maintaining validity was prioritised (Ofqual, 2020c).

## Delay

For all VTQs that could not be calculated or adapted without maintaining the validity of the qualification, assessments could be delayed, but this option should only have been considered where calculation or adaptation was not appropriate or possible (Ofqual, 2020a). Where assessments were cancelled, they should have been offered at later dates, such as by the autumn term (Ofqual, 2020a). Delaying assessments was a last resort option when calculate or adapt was not possible and ensured that as many learners as possible achieved a fair and valid result (Ofqual, 2020a).

## What happened with VTQ assessments after summer 2020 and how will COVID-19 continue to affect VTQs?

With the nature of COVID-19, and its subsequent effects on schools and colleges, the awarding of VTQs in summer and autumn 2020 and 2021 has had to adapt. Because many VTQs are modular, awarding organisations were able to provide assessment opportunities after summer 2020. However, what assessments were possible to take will have varied for different schools and colleges.

The announcement in January that summer 2021 exams would be cancelled for GCSEs and A Levels also included that VTQ exams from February would also be cancelled. Exams in January could go ahead, though schools and colleges had a choice as to whether learners sat them or not (S. Lebus, personal communication, January 13, 2021). At the time of writing, how this decision will affect VTQ external and internal assessment in 2021 is in consultation (Department for Education & Ofqual, 2021). The effects of COVID-19 on the VTQ approaches highlight some of the differences between VTQs and GQs such as GCSEs and A Levels. The differences in qualification structures and assessments, as well as the diverse VTQ landscape have meant that they have not necessarily followed the same approach as GQs. However, while different methods were needed for different VTQs in 2020, the underlying principle of what evidence could be used and how it was applied was consistent. For 2021, while the differences between VTQ and GQ are still present in their structure and delivery, there are similarities in their purpose, as they are both used for progression to further education or employment. Because of this, awarding organisations and the regulator will look to ensure that, in comparison to learners taking GCSE and A Level, VTQ learners are not advantaged or disadvantaged.

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