



NCTJ QUALITY ASSURANCE AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20

Introduction

The NCTJ quality assurance and standards (QA&S) committee has been operational since 2007. It meets annually, or more frequently when required, to oversee quality, standardisation and fairness across all qualifications and services.

Areas considered, monitored and discussed by the committee include:

- standardisation – moderation, centre spot checks, results analysis
- customer service – centre and candidate feedback, complaints
- equal opportunities
- reasonable adjustments and special considerations
- appeals
- exam incidents
- suspected malpractice and maladministration
- compliance with Ofqual, CCEA (Northern Ireland) and Qualifications Wales' general conditions of recognition
- compliance with EQA providers for end-point assessments
- emerging trends and/or issues.

Committee membership is drawn from representatives of different sectors delivering NCTJ qualifications along with industry professionals, the NCTJ principal examiner and members of the NCTJ senior management team. It is chaired by an independent representative appointed by the NCTJ main board of directors. The post is currently held by Mr Sean Dooley, former editor of *The Sentinel*, Stoke-on-Trent.

This report is compiled to help explain the work of the committee, and to share some of the data it examines, reviews and debates, to ensure the reliability and transparency of NCTJ services.



Socially distanced Cardiff University students begin their MA studies

Coronavirus contingency planning

The NCTJ is committed to ensuring the safety of its stakeholders and to upholding the interests of its centres and candidates and the integrity of its exams and assessments. In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the NCTJ put in place a contingency policy and contingency plan, alongside frequently asked questions for centres and candidates. These documents are available on the NCTJ website and are regularly updated in response to developments and changes to the NCTJ's guidance and to the guidance issued by the UK government.

Both documents outline the NCTJ's approach to assessment delivery during this unprecedented time in relation to our qualifications and end-point assessments, and the steps the NCTJ is taking to try to mitigate any adverse effect, in relation to our qualifications, arising from the disruption to our exams and assessments.



Community News Project reporters



Sports journalism students at News Associates cover Brisbane v Richmond in the AFL preliminary final

Remote exams

Like many awarding organisations, the NCTJ's activities were seriously disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic and we were unable to run any diploma exams in April. We looked at ways to mitigate this impact and the adverse effect the delay to exams could have on our candidates, in particular those studying on one year and fast track courses.

On 9 April the Secretary of State issued a Direction to Ofqual, our regulators in England, which indicated that, where possible, students and other learners who are taking vocational and technical qualifications that are used for progression to and through employment, further or higher education should be issued a set of results in summer 2020 in order to allow them to progress to the next stage of their lives. As the NCTJ offers qualifications that assess occupational competence, we investigated the opportunity to adapt the mode of delivery for our exams, so they could be sat remotely. The opportunity to sit NCTJ exams securely at home would support candidates' remote training and give them the opportunity to achieve their NCTJ qualification during the pandemic without further delay.

Following a successful period of testing in April, the NCTJ announced in a webinar with our centres in May that our online exams, held in Cirrus, would be delivered remotely using Proctorio, a secure proctoring software. Offline exams (exams sat outside of Cirrus) would be delivered remotely via Zoom, using online invigilation. Shorthand exams, which are comprised of an exam dictation delivered outside of Cirrus and a transcription delivered in Cirrus, would be delivered remotely using a combination of Zoom and Proctorio.

The platforms and procedures the NCTJ has put in place for remote delivery protect the integrity of our assessments and the reliability and validity of our assessment results, whilst giving candidates a much needed opportunity to achieve their qualification without further delay. Our proposal and procedures for remote exams were discussed and signed off by the quality assurance and standards committee at a special meeting in May.

Between May and October the NCTJ delivered approximately 4,842 exams, most of which were delivered remotely. This figure includes exams for all diploma subjects, including shorthand, and exams for the NQJ. Additional exams were run in August and September, to ensure candidates who could not sit remotely had the opportunity to sit exams in-centre as lockdown restrictions eased.

The option of remote exams will continue to be available for exams taking place in the 2020-21 academic year, whilst coronavirus restrictions remain in place.

Because remote exams are not suitable for everyone, the NCTJ is continuing to offer this mode of assessment delivery as an option only, and have asked our centres to prioritise candidates who cannot sit exams remotely for in-centre sittings, which can now take place with specific restrictions under the current government guidance. We also offer roll on roll off exam dates, so there are exam opportunities every month in 2020-21 between November and July, excluding February.

Qualification results analysis

Certificate in Foundation Journalism 2019-20

The assessment methods for the CFJ qualification did not require any adaptation to be delivered remotely during the pandemic. During 2019-20, 60 candidates submitted unit assessments to the NCTJ for marking. This equates to 317 unit assessments. This is compared to 45 candidates who submitted assessments in the previous year. 17 candidates successfully completed the qualification during the 2019-20 academic year.

Diploma in Journalism 2019-20

During 2019-20, 6431 diploma examinations (excluding shorthand) have been sat (including resits). This figure is 1761 sittings down from 2018-19. Overall achievement figures for the 2019-20 academic year have been tabled below for each module of the Diploma in Journalism.

Diploma in Journalism (exam sittings) results summary 2019-20

Exam	No. of Sittings	Gold Standard		A-E pass rate	
Essential Journalism	1233	654	53%	1193	97%
Newspaper Magazine Regulation Test	972	729	75%	935	96%
Essential Media Law & Regulation	1140	821	72%	1062	93%
Court Reporting	895	635	71%	839	94%
Public Affairs	824	647	79%	797	97%
Sports Journalism	117	84	72%	112	96%
Production Journalism	277	174	63%	272	98%
Business of Magazines	55	49	89%	54	98%
Videojournalism	287	247	86%	282	98%
Business & Finance	13	12	92%	13	100%
PR & Communications for Journalists	19	15	79%	18	95%
Intro to PR for Journalists	27	9	33%	24	89%
Journalism for a Digital Audience	253	207	82%	244	96%
Practical Magazine Journalism	69	60	87%	67	97%
TV Journalism	3	2	67%	3	100%
Radio Journalism	1	1	100%	1	100%
Broadcast Journalism – TV News	61	51	84%	61	100%
Broadcast Journalism – Radio News	87	71	82%	82	94%
Broadcast Journalism – Regulation	98	82	84%	98	100%
Total no. of exam sittings	6431				

With the exception of the Introduction to PR for Journalists module, over half of the exams marked in each module have been awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade, with the overall majority achieving an E grade or above. In 2019-20, 71 per cent of candidates achieved the gold standard compared with 66 per cent in 2018-19. Ninety-six per cent of candidates achieved A-E grades in 2019-20, compared with 94 per cent in 2018-19.

E-portfolios

In the 2019-20 academic year, 776 e-portfolios were submitted for assessment. Of these submissions, 94 per cent were awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade.

Shorthand exams

A total of 2540 shorthand examinations were sat in 2019-20 (including resits) and the achievement figures for the year have been tabled below.

Speed wpm	Number of sittings	Number of passes	Pass rate
60	879	357	41%
70	4	1	25%
80	419	135	32%
100	1167	280	24%
110	62	13	21%
120	9	3	33%
Total no. of exam sittings	2540	789	31%

In 2019-20, 24 per cent achieved 100wpm, which is the same as the pass rate in 2018-19. Overall, the percentage pass rate for students achieving a shorthand speed of 60wpm or over decreased by two percentage points from 33 per cent to 31 per cent.

Level 3 Junior Journalist Apprenticeship 2019-20

For end-point assessments taking place during the coronavirus pandemic, the NCTJ followed the guidance issued by IfATE and the ESFA on the gov.uk website. The end-point assessment for the junior journalist standard is made up of a work-related project and a qualities and behaviours assessment, both of which can be conducted remotely.

In 2019-20, a total of 95 apprentices were registered with the NCTJ for the level 3 junior journalist apprenticeship standard at the following centres: Highbury College, Cardiff and Vale College, Press Association Training, City of Wolverhampton College, Bauer Media Academy, Darlington College and The Sheffield College. 58 end-point assessments were completed in the 2019-20 academic year.

National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ) 2019-20

During 2019-20, 84 candidates sat 205 NQJ examinations and assessments from November 2019 to July 2020 (including resits). Because of the lockdown restrictions, the NQJ exams in July were successfully delivered remotely, with candidates able to sit them securely at home.

NQJ	Number of sittings	Number of passes	Pass rate
Practical skills	68	58	85%
Media law and ethics in practice	79	59	75%
e-Logbook	58	56	97%
Total no. of exam sittings	205	173	84%

Out of the 84 candidates who sat the NQJ in 2019-20, 70 per cent achieved the qualification, an increase of four percentage points compared to 2018-19.



Student representatives share ideas at the 2020 Student Council conference

Student council feedback

The purpose of the student council is to provide a forum for students to tell us what they think about the NCTJ training scheme and how it can be improved. It is a condition of accreditation that all NCTJ-accredited courses are represented on the student council. All council members are responsible for providing feedback to the NCTJ during their course and act as a direct link with students.

Forty-nine student representatives from courses across the UK attended the NCTJ Student Council on 31 January 2020 at the FT in London. Scheherazade Daneshkhu, director of editorial talent at the Financial Times, chaired a panel of editors and alumni, answering questions from the students. Students also had a session asking senior staff and the principal examiner at the NCTJ questions about the diploma and all aspects of their courses before taking part in an exercise to discuss the NCTJ and present ideas for improvements. One representative from each of the seven groups presented their answers to the forum. The headlines from their answers are set out in the table below. The seven presenters were invited to the next meeting of the NCTJ main board in March 2020 to present their ideas and comments.

What's good about the NCTJ	What could be better about the NCTJ
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Delivers relevant industry skills, including media law, to prepare you for work in the industry ✓ Flexible diploma structure ✓ Offers shorthand training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prices for exam resits could be lower • Modernise and liven up exams for the social media generation • Communication between the NCTJ and students could be improved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Valuable, relevant and well recognised in the industry ✓ Tutors have real industry experience ✓ Offers apprenticeships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in training for community news reporters should be consistent • Better communication between the NCTJ and centres • More notice for webinars for community news reporters • Access to the e-portfolio could be given earlier
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Gives students the element of prestige ✓ The diploma qualification can fit into different courses, e.g. university, fast-track, etc. to accommodate all types of students ✓ Practical experience, for example news days and going out on patch to cover stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less outdated case studies in media law • More international content for public affairs • Too many exams
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Covers a lot of practical journalism skills in a short amount of time ✓ A good variety of elective modules on the diploma ✓ Getting the NCTJ diploma sets you apart ✓ The NCTJ is good at taking on feedback from students ✓ The frequency of NCTJ visits to centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More events to meet the NCTJ's industry connections • Retake costs are too high and could put students off achieving the gold standard • The number of news days on accredited courses should be consistent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Makes people's dreams come true ✓ The diploma qualification has prestige, gives you an edge and is well-respected ✓ Offers events like the Student Council, where you can ask the NCTJ questions ✓ There is a focus on industry connections and up-to-date industry knowledge at NCTJ centres 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NCTJ diploma qualification could be made mandatory for journalists • Some students struggle to see the benefits of shorthand • More practice papers should be available • Offer more days like the Student Council event
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The NCTJ diploma makes you employable ✓ Hands-on experience ✓ Course is held to a high standard ✓ Well-structured courses ✓ Thrown in the deep end 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide training for death knocks • More promotion of accredited courses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The diploma opens a lot of doors in the industry ✓ Focus on work experience placements ✓ Students can have access to the Journalism Diversity Fund bursary ✓ Shorthand training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a handbook to students about the NCTJ and the diploma structure • More mental health provision • Provide an online forum for students • More exemplar materials for the e-portfolio

Complaints

The NCTJ publishes its policy and procedure for dealing with complaints on its website.

Eight complaints were received by the NCTJ in 2019-20, a decrease of one compared to 2018-19.

Two of the complaints made to the NCTJ in 2019-20 related to the NCTJ distance learning diploma course. Two related to unreasonable behaviour by candidates. Of the remaining four complaints – one related to a candidate's dissatisfaction with their centre, one related to the content of an NCTJ communication, one related to a query about examining, and one concerned a complaint from a candidate about their journalism employer.

There were no complaints reported by Ofqual about the NCTJ in 2019-20.

Reasonable adjustments and special considerations

In 2019-20, 103 candidates had reasonable adjustments approved for NCTJ examinations and/or assessments. This is a decrease of 21 candidates on 2018-19 figures when 124 candidates had adjustments approved.

Any adjustment that the NCTJ approves must not alter the nature, rigour or integrity of the assessment. Any adjustment to assessments must not give the learner an unfair advantage or disadvantage over others.

In 2019-20, the greatest number of reasonable adjustment approvals made were for candidates with dyslexia, specific learning difficulties and slow processing speed.

Appeals

The NCTJ publishes its policy and procedure for dealing with appeals on its website. The policy covers appeals of assessment results and appeals relating to other decisions made by the NCTJ.

A total of nine appeals were formerly investigated during 2019-20, a decrease of five on the 2018-19 figures.

Appeals of assessment results

Seven of the appeals investigated during 2019-20 concerned individual candidate results. A total of eight assessment results were reviewed on appeal and three were upheld leading to an increase in the grade awarded.

All other appeals

There was one section B appeal and one stage 2 appeal submitted to the NCTJ during 2019-20. These two appeals were not upheld.

Exam incidents

Out of 10,368 assessments sat in 2019-20, there were a total of 30 incidents involving NCTJ exams. Of these incidents, seven related to technical issues with exams held online in the Cirrus assessment platform and/or Proctorio software, three related to incidents with exam papers and 16 related to issues with exams delivery. Other incidents related to NCTJ results and certificates, and centre issues.

Spot checks

Between November and March, the NCTJ conducted a total of 26 spot checks on NCTJ in-centre exams across 20 centres. Of these 26 checks, 17 checks were passed with no issues, two checks were passed with observations for the centre, and one check was passed with conditions because of an issue identified by the spot checker.

For remote exams taking place in May onwards, spot checks have been conducted on the Proctorio recordings for exams sat remotely on Cirrus, using a risk-based approach. The NCTJ conducted spot checks for a total of 1657 exams sat remotely between May and October. From these spot checks, we identified 23 breaches in procedure which led to exams being declared null and void.

The NCTJ is also conducting sample spot checks on recordings for exams delivered remotely via Zoom. No breaches of procedure have been identified from these spot checks.

Suspected malpractice and maladministration

The NCTJ publishes its policy and procedure for dealing with cases of suspected malpractice and/or maladministration by centres and candidates on its website.

During the academic year 2019-20, six cases were investigated. This is one more than the number reported/investigated in 2018-19.

All six cases involved suspected malpractice concerning individual candidates. Following investigations, four candidates were prohibited from taking NCTJ exams for a period of three months or longer. Two cases proved to have insufficient evidence and were closed. In all cases, investigations were carried out by the NCTJ and, where applicable, exams were declared null and void. For incidents of candidate malpractice which occurred at centres, the centre was instructed to carry out an initial investigation into the incident and to provide an investigation report to the NCTJ to assist with our findings. Ongoing checks continue to monitor centres where candidate malpractice was confirmed, where applicable.

There were no incidents of alleged malpractice or maladministration by centres in 2019-20.

The NCTJ takes reports of suspected malpractice or maladministration extremely seriously. Each incident investigated is reviewed by the quality assurance and standards committee. Any sanctions applied in accordance with the NCTJ sanctions policy, which is published on the NCTJ website, are also reviewed to ensure a fair and consistent approach is taken to each case.

Conflicts of interest

Key stakeholders, and the individuals who work for them, are involved in a range of activities and have a range of functions with the NCTJ. The NCTJ recognises the need to prevent or minimise potential conflicts and identify and manage conflicts of interest to maintain the integrity of our qualifications and awarding organisation functions.

Our conflicts of interest policy aims to draw attention to the possibility of conflicts, minimise or prevent a conflict occurring and manage conflicts that have arisen. Our conflicts of interest policy can be viewed on our website via the following link:

<http://www.nctj.com/about-us/Policiesandprocedures>

Annual self-evaluation

To ensure that our systems of internal control continue to be robust and effective, the NCTJ has in place an annual self-evaluation process which monitors our compliance with the regulators' general conditions of recognition. As part of this process the NCTJ commissions an independent consultant to conduct an annual audit of evidence of the NCTJ's compliance with the regulators' conditions of recognition, with oversight of the NCTJ risk register. The recommendations from this audit are logged in an internal self-evaluation action plan. This plan details any identified recommendations/issues/risks, the action and evidence required to rectify them, who is responsible for the action and when the action must be completed by.

The NCTJ's annual audit for 2019-20 took place in October 2020. Areas of focus included assessment adaptations and contingency arrangements for NCTJ qualifications made available during the coronavirus pandemic. Actions identified in the plan for 2020 relate to the following areas of the regulators' general conditions of recognition: governance, arrangements with third parties, setting and delivering the assessment, marking and issuing results, and appeals and certificates. This action plan is reviewed monthly by all NCTJ staff to ensure that actions are completed by the dates specified. Our next annual audit is due to take place in 2021.

Event notifications

As a recognised awarding organisation, the NCTJ must promptly notify the regulatory bodies when it has cause to believe that any event has occurred, or is likely to occur, which could have an adverse effect on learners. Examples of such events may include those where:

- there has been a loss or theft of, or a breach of confidentiality in, any assessment materials
- the awarding organisation believes that there has been an incident of malpractice or maladministration, which could invalidate the award of a qualification which it makes available
- the awarding organisation has issued incorrect results or certificates
- the awarding organisation is named as a party in any criminal or civil proceedings or is subjected to a regulatory investigation or sanction by any professional, regulatory, or government body

The NCTJ made no notifications to Ofqual in 2019-20 of a potential adverse effect.

Chairman's overview

Last year's annual report summary emphasised the constant challenge lying behind its wealth of statistics. In sharp contrast, the bald data for 2020 needs little embellishment to illustrate the scale of upheaval in NCTJ operations.

Record figures for the delivery of remote examinations tell their own story of immense technical and administrative accomplishment. Substantial expansion in remote exam placements were organised and steered through consultation, technology trials and validation in a matter of weeks, and implemented without impact on rigour and standards.

For the NCTJ team, the true reflection their effort lay in keeping faith with the student body. Though pandemic restrictions paralysed much of academia, thousands of journalism candidates were able to avoid becoming trapped in a vocational limbo, while those unable to sit their planned examinations remotely were given as much clarity and reassurance as uncertainty allowed.

The implications of COVID-19 and its legacy will reverberate for the foreseeable future within all NCTJ relationships. Opportunities abound for future development, especially in areas of exam delivery.

So, also, do the challenges; notably the safeguarding of academic integrity, commitments to inclusion and the continuing need to reappraise and refine existing qualifications to meet the pace of media evolution and student choice.

As ever, 2021 prophesies no less disruption for the small executive. Exceptional teamwork and resilience in navigating the demands of the last year brought wide and deserved appreciation from NCTJ stakeholders and beyond. These qualities will remain crucial as continual reassessment of future planning is added to the incessant operational pressures of exam delivery.

All of which uncertainty provides an appropriate reminder of this committee's unchanging core purpose; and its commitment to safeguarding the quality and standards of NCTJ assessments, which ultimately underpins the validity of every aspect of the work of the Council.

Sean Dooley

Chairman, quality assurance and standards committee



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