



NCTJ QUALITY ASSURANCE AND STANDARDS COMMITTEE

ANNUAL REPORT 2020-21

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.



News Associates students hard at work covering the Budget

Coronavirus contingency plans and remote exams

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 April 2020, in response to the 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 and our regulators.

Both documents outline the NCTJ's approach to assessment delivery during the pandemic 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 any disruption to our exams and assessments.



City of Wolverhampton College students celebrate graduating

The NCTJ continued to offer the option of remote exams in 2020-21 for all NCTJ exams, including shorthand, so candidates had the opportunity to sit their exams securely from home. Our online exams, held in Cirrus, continue to be delivered remotely using Proctorio, a secure proctoring software. Offline exams (exams sat outside of Cirrus) continue to 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, are 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.

Between October 2020 and August 2021, the NCTJ has delivered approximately 12,512 exams, most of which have been delivered remotely. This figure includes exams for all diploma subjects, including shorthand, and exams for the NQJ. Additional exams were run in August, to ensure candidates who could not sit remotely had the opportunity to sit exams in-centre as coronavirus restrictions eased.

The NCTJ will continue to offer the option of remote exams in 2021-22. 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 under current government

guidance. We also offer roll on roll off exam dates, so there are exam opportunities every month in 2021-22 between November and July, excluding February.

Ofqual, our regulator in England, has introduced an updated contingency regulatory framework for the 2021-22 academic year, published in August 2021. Under this framework, exams and assessments will go ahead as normal in 2021-22 and awarding organisations can continue with adaptations already made to assessments under the previous contingency framework, where necessary and appropriate. This includes remote exams, which the NCTJ introduced as an adaptation under the first contingency framework published by Ofqual in May 2020.

Ofqual is currently completing an information gathering exercise on remote invigilation and remote assessment, to understand the work awarding organisations are doing in this area more thoroughly and the risks associated with this method of delivery. The aim of this exercise is for Ofqual to determine how remote invigilation will be regulated by them in the long-term, beyond 2021-22. The NCTJ were asked to be part of this information gathering exercise, along with nine other awarding organisations, and met with Ofqual in July 2021 to discuss our approach to remote exams. The overall findings from Ofqual's information gathering exercise are expected to be published early in 2022, and will support the NCTJ's decision-making on the longer-term offer of remote exams for centres in 2022-23 onwards.

Qualification results analysis

Certificate in Foundation Journalism 2020-21

The assessment methods for the Certificate in Foundation Journalism have not required any adaptations to be delivered remotely during the pandemic. During 2020-21, 132 candidates submitted unit assessments to the NCTJ for marking. This equates to 495 unit assessments. This is compared to 60 candidates who submitted 317 assessments in the previous year. 25 candidates successfully completed the qualification during the 2020-21 academic year.

Diploma in Journalism 2020-21

During 2020-21, 9,019 diploma examinations (excluding shorthand) have been sat (including resits). This is an increase of 2,588 sittings from exams sat in 2019-20. Overall achievement figures for the 2020-21 academic year have been tabled below for each module of the Diploma in Journalism.

Diploma in Journalism (exam sittings) results summary 2020-21

Exam	No. of Sittings	Gold Standard		A-E pass rate	
Essential Journalism	1632	837	51%	1565	96%
Newspaper Magazine Regulation Test	1357	975	72%	1306	96%
Essential Media Law & Regulation	1495	920	62%	1310	88%
Court Reporting	1208	733	61%	1049	87%
Public Affairs	1348	848	63%	1187	88%
Sports Journalism	204	136	67%	198	97%
Editing Skills for Journalists	258	178	69%	252	98%
Business of Magazines	78	64	82%	76	97%
Videojournalism for Digital Platforms	359	309	86%	349	97%
Business & Finance	11	9	82%	11	100%
PR & Communications for Journalists	31	13	42%	30	97%
Intro to PR for Journalists	106	38	36%	90	85%
Journalism for a Digital Audience	428	352	82%	412	96%
Data Journalism	33	27	82%	31	94%
Practical Magazine Journalism	115	99	86%	114	99%
TV Journalism	6	6	100%	6	100%
Radio Journalism	18	15	83%	16	89%
Broadcast Journalism – TV News	103	85	83%	103	100%
Broadcast Journalism – Radio News	108	96	89%	107	99%
Broadcast Journalism – Regulation	121	102	84%	119	98%
Total no. of exam sittings	9019				

With the exception of the PR modules, 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 2020-21, 65 per cent of candidates achieved the gold standard compared with 71 per cent in 2019-20. Ninety-two per cent of candidates achieved A-E grades in 2020-21, compared with 96 per cent in 2019-20.

E-portfolios

In the 2020-21 academic year, 831 e-portfolios have been submitted for assessment. Of these submissions, 95 per cent were awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade.

Shorthand exams

A total of 3,269 shorthand examinations have been sat (including resits) and the achievement figures for the year have been tabled below.

Speed wpm	Number of sittings	Number of passes	Pass rate
60	1295	502	39%
70	26	12	46%
80	564	157	28%
100	1348	283	21%
110	22	12	36%
120	14	5	36%
Total number of exam sittings	3269	971	30%

In 2020-21, 21 per cent achieved 100wpm compared to 24 per cent in 2019-20. Overall, the percentage pass rate for students achieving a shorthand speed of 60wpm or over decreased by one percentage point from 31 per cent to 30 per cent for the year.

Apprenticeships

To deliver end-point assessments during the pandemic, the NCTJ has followed the guidance and temporary flexibilities issued by IfATE and the ESFA published on the gov.uk website.

In 2020-21, a total of 50 apprentices were registered with the NCTJ for the level 3 junior journalist apprenticeship standard at the following centres: Bauer Media, Darlington College, Highbury College, Learning and Development Bureau, and PA Training. 94 end-point assessments were completed in the 2020-21 academic year.

A further 13 apprentices were registered for the level 7 senior journalist apprenticeship standard at the following centre: PA Training. First end-point assessments for this standard will be taken in June/July 2022.

National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ) 2020-21

During 2020-21, 94 candidates sat 224 NQJ examinations and assessments from November 2020 to July 2021 (including resits). Because of coronavirus restrictions, most NQJ exams delivered in 2020-21 were delivered remotely, with candidates able to sit them securely at home.

NQJ	Number of sittings	Number of passes	Pass rate
Practical skills	86	54	63%
Media law and ethics in practice	74	60	81%
e-Logbook	64	63	98%
Total no. of exam sittings	224	177	60%

Out of the 94 candidates who sat the NQJ in 2020-21, a total of 56 candidates achieved the qualification, a pass rate of 60 per cent.



Fast-track News Associates students presenting news bulletins in front of a green screen

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.

As the student council could not run in-person in 2020-21 because of the pandemic, the NCTJ ran three remote events for student representatives, split up according to sector: FE and independents; HE undergraduates; and HE postgraduates. This approach allowed the NCTJ to deliver a succinct and dedicated event to students in each sector, and gave students the opportunity to connect with their peers on courses in the same sector. As in previous years, students were able to feed back to the NCTJ and ask questions to the NCTJ team, as well as having the opportunity to quiz editors and hear from them about starting their careers in the industry.

Feedback from students

At each event, students had the opportunity to ask questions to senior journalists and editors, which mainly focused on employment opportunities, advice for new journalists, plus freelancing and pitching ideas.

Students also had a Q and A session asking the NCTJ's principal examiner and senior staff questions about the diploma and all aspects of their courses before taking part in a group feedback exercise to discuss what's good about the NCTJ, ideas for further support, and how they are finding remote teaching.

Below are the headlines from the group feedback exercise from each event.

What's good about the NCTJ

- Student council events, which give students an opportunity to feedback to the NCTJ, network, and talk to editors
- Students and editors value the weight of NCTJ accreditation and having the diploma makes you stand out from the crowd
- Adaptations made in response to Covid-19
- The array of skills you learn, very relevant to the journalism industry
- The diploma qualification is recognisable and gives you a platform for work and jobs
- Abundance of helpful resources online, for example with shorthand training
- The diploma slots in well with different types of courses
- There is a strong emphasis on training in social media and digital skills
- Really enjoy the variety of modules on offer
- The e-portfolio and the range of content required to be able to demonstrate your skills
- Remote exams

How are you finding remote learning?

- Like the flexibility of remote learning, but you don't get the opportunity to meet all students on course
- Not ideal, some students struggle with motivation and some tutors understand this more than others
- It's harder to get individual sessions with lecturers and this experience varies from student to student
- You measure yourself less against others and can be more productive yourself
- Shorthand has been difficult to learn online
- Remote teaching has varied across courses. It can be an isolating experience as you cannot bond as closely with peers, which makes production/news days harder
- The interactive elements of the training need improvement, some centres have moved to very text/PowerPoint heavy training
- It has given part-time students more flexibility to study the diploma qualification
- Obtaining video footage for coursework/portfolio assessments is challenging
- Remote teaching can be tiring with a lot of screen time
- Some students have missed out on opportunities such as work experience, visits and opportunities to meet new people

What further support would you want from the NCTJ?

- Support with online shorthand teaching
- Online sessions from the NCTJ, drop-ins for exam preparation with exam scenarios
- Online advice for finding remote work experience placements, perhaps in the form of a newsletter
- More support for online exams in relation to technical issues and exam schedules on fast-track courses
- More financial support for appeals and resits, particularly for diversity fund recipients
- Would like photographs to be an element of the diploma e-portfolio as well as video, and for students to have the flexibility to submit portfolio work where they have prepared but not written the story

NCTJ staff provided feedback in response to the above points on the e-portfolio, shorthand training, exam timetables, and remote exams.



Complaints

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

Four complaints were received by the NCTJ in 2020-21, a decrease of four compared to 2019-20.

Two of the complaints made to the NCTJ in 2020-21 related to candidates' dissatisfaction with the delivery of training at their centre. Of the remaining two complaints, one related to the delivery of a Certificate in Foundation Journalism distance learning course and an incident of suspected malpractice/maladministration, and one related to the delivery of a monitoring visit at an NCTJ centre.

There were no complaints reported to Ofqual about the NCTJ in 2020-21.

Reasonable adjustments and special considerations

In 2020-21, 174 candidates had reasonable adjustments approved for NCTJ examinations and/or assessments. This is an increase of 71 candidates on 2019-20 figures, when 103 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 2020-21, the greatest number of reasonable adjustment approvals made were for candidates with dyslexia, specific learning difficulties and anxiety/depression (the latter may be linked to the impact of the pandemic on individual candidates).

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 10 appeals were formerly investigated during 2020-21, an increase of one from 2019-20 when nine appeals were formerly investigated.

Appeals of assessment results

All of the appeals investigated during 2020-21 concerned individual candidate results. A total of 11 assessment results were reviewed on appeal

and six were upheld, leading to an increase in the grade awarded.

All other appeals

There were no section B appeals or stage 2 appeals submitted to the NCTJ during 2020-21.

Exam incidents

Out of 14,129 assessments sat in 2020-21, there were a total of 28 incidents involving NCTJ exams. Out of these incidents, a total of 24 were connected to remote exam sittings. Of these 24 incidents, 18 related to candidate breaches of procedure (some involving more than one centre/candidate), one related to a technical issue with Proctorio, the NCTJ's proctoring software, two related to issues with the delivery of remote exams, and three related to candidate issues in remote shorthand exams. Of the remaining four incidents, one related to NCTJ results and certificates, two related to incidents with exam papers, and one related to a technical issue with the NCTJ's online assessment platform, Cirrus.

Spot checks

Since the introduction of remote exams, the NCTJ has been spot checking the Proctorio recordings for exams held on our Cirrus platform using a risk-based approach. In 2020-21, the NCTJ conducted Proctorio checks for 4,498 exams sat remotely in 2020-21.

From these checks, the NCTJ identified 26 breaches in procedure which led to exams being declared null and void. We also identified 11 instances of suspected candidate malpractice from these checks which required investigation.

The NCTJ conducted spot checks on recordings for exams delivered remotely via Zoom in 2020-21. We identified two breaches of procedure from these checks, which were investigated as centre maladministration.

The NCTJ was not able to conduct traditional spot checks on in-centre exams in 2020-21 because of the coronavirus pandemic. This will be reviewed again in the upcoming autumn term to determine whether traditional checks can be resumed on in-centre exams.

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 2020-21, 13 incidents of malpractice/maladministration were investigated. This is seven more than the number reported/investigated in 2019-20. This increase can be attributed to the delivery of remote exams throughout 2020-21, which are higher risk for malpractice/maladministration than exams delivered in-centre.

Eleven cases of suspected malpractice concerning individual candidates were investigated during this period. This is five more than the number investigated in 2019-20. Following investigations, malpractice was confirmed in eight of these incidents and sanctions were applied to the candidate. 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 collect initial statements from relevant parties at the centre and to provide a malpractice report to the NCTJ to assist with our findings. Ongoing checks continue to monitor centres where candidate malpractice was confirmed, where applicable.

There were two incidents of maladministration by centres during this period. These were related to the delivery of a remote editing skills for journalists' exam, and a remote shorthand exam. There were no incidents of alleged malpractice by centres during this period.

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 its 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 2020-21 took place in October 2021. Areas of focus included governance, centre approval, assessment delivery, and delivery of end-point assessments. Actions identified in the plan for 2021-22 relate to the following areas of the regulators' general conditions of recognition: governance, marking and issuing results, and delivery of end-point assessments. 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 2022.

Event notifications

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- 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



Chairman's overview

The Quality Assurance and Standards Committee has now operated for so long in a climate of radical change it has become a formality to report another year of unprecedented challenge and opportunity.

Reconciling the ambitions of a Covid-frustrated student body and the demands of a splintering media industry is sufficient test for any stretched executive. Yet the past 12 months have also registered increasing influence and progress of Council services in areas of student support, widening partnerships and innovative exam development.

Within this committee's main objectives of focus and scrutiny, statistics show no lessening of standards in assessment delivery. While Ofqual cites substantial rises in complaints and disruption across almost all awarding bodies, NCTJ figures reveal little or no variations. Student feedback shows strong approval for Covid related adaptations and consultation. On a wider scale, NCTJ accreditation has again grown in strength and value.

Key challenges for the immediate future centre on balancing the pace and extent of change as we fully embrace the new era of remote exams. The march of online testing throws up difficulties, opportunities and dispute in equal measure for both students and the NCTJ executive. It is a debate now playing out across every journalism centre, college and university and one that only time and experience will fully resolve.

Against this background it is satisfying to record another year of growth and innovation across NCTJ activities, driven by the skills and determination of a small executive team. The next year will inevitably see more reform as NCTJ services react to shifts across media and student demand. As testing and qualifications are reviewed and renewed it is crucial to remember that the starting point for continuing success lies, as ever, in sharp antennae to changing journalism and sensitive evolution of exam delivery and development.

Sean Dooley

Chairman, quality assurance and standards committee



National Council for the
Training of Journalists

NCTJ

The New Granary, Station Road
Newport, Saffron Walden
Essex CB11 3PL

Tel: 01799 544014

Email: info@nctj.com

www.nctj.com