



NCTJ Quality Assurance and Standards Committee Annual Report

2021-22





Introduction

Graduates from News Associates' School of Journalism celebrate their achievements

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. Sean Dooley, who was appointed to the role of committee chair in 2007, held this role until his death in July 2022. His appointment was made shortly after the NCTJ achieved recognition as a professional awarding body by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (now Ofqual). A long-serving and highly-respected editor, Sean did a fantastic job overseeing the transparency and fairness of NCTJ qualifications.

The committee's 2022 meeting was chaired by the NCTJ's principal examiner, Amanda Ball. A new committee chair will be nominated by the NCTJ main board of directors in 2022-23.

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.



Coronavirus contingency plans and remote exams

University of Gloucestershire students are joined by Sky Sports News presenter Kyle Walker

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 which 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 are available to view on our website here:

<https://www.nctj.com/about-nctj/policies/>

These documents outline the NCTJ's approach to assessment delivery during the pandemic in relation to our qualifications and end-point assessments. They also outline 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.

The NCTJ continued to offer the option of remote exams in 2021-22 for all NCTJ exams, including shorthand, so candidates had the opportunity to sit their exams securely from home. Remote exams on Cirrus are remotely invigilated by Proctorio, and offline exams (exams sat outside of Cirrus) are invigilated remotely via Zoom. 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 in place for remote delivery protect the integrity of our assessments and the reliability and validity of our assessment results, whilst giving candidates the opportunity to achieve their qualification by sitting exams at home.

Between October 2021 and July 2022 the NCTJ delivered approximately 10,525 exams. Around

30 per cent of these exams were delivered remotely. This figure includes exams for all diploma subjects, including shorthand, and exams for the National Qualification in Journalism. In comparison to the number of exams delivered in 2020-21, the number of exams delivered over the last academic year is closer to the number delivered in 2019-20 and pre-pandemic in 2018-19, showing a return to pre-pandemic numbers.

Now that all coronavirus restrictions have been lifted and Ofqual's contingency regulatory framework is no longer in place, from September 2022 remote exam sittings will only be available to candidates on accredited courses if an application for a special consideration has been approved by the NCTJ. All accredited course providers are expected to deliver NCTJ exams in-centre going forward unless there are exceptional circumstances that are discussed and agreed in advance with the NCTJ's assessment team. The only exceptions to this rule are candidates registered on remote courses accredited by the NCTJ, candidates registered on apprenticeship courses and distance learners sitting NCTJ national exams, who will not require an application for a special consideration approved by the NCTJ to sit exams remotely.

Now that all coronavirus restrictions have been lifted, no further temporary arrangements and adaptations for e-portfolio or coursework assessments will be permitted from September 2022, unless government guidance due to Covid-19 changes.

Ofqual completed an information gathering exercise on remote invigilation and remote assessment in July 2021, to understand the work awarding organisations are doing in this area more thoroughly and the risks associated with this method of delivery. The NCTJ were asked to be part of this information gathering exercise, along with nine other awarding organisations. We are still waiting for Ofqual to publish the overall findings from this exercise.

Qualification results analysis

Certificate in Foundation Journalism 2021-22

During 2021-22, 95 candidates submitted unit assessments to the NCTJ for marking. This equates to 449 unit assessments. This is compared to 132 candidates who submitted 495 unit assessments in the previous year. Of the 95 candidates who submitted in 2021-22, 68 were distance learners and 27 were on approved courses with training providers. 35 candidates successfully completed the CFJ qualification in the 2021-22 academic year.

Diploma in Journalism 2021-22

During 2021-22, 7,675 diploma examinations (excluding shorthand) have been sat (including resits). This is a decrease of 1,344 sittings from exams sat in 2020-21, but is comparable to the number of diploma exams delivered pre-pandemic in 2018-19, when 8,192 exams were delivered. Overall achievement figures for the 2021-22 academic year have been tabled below for each module of the Diploma in Journalism.

Diploma in Journalism (exam sittings) results summary 2021-22

Exam	No. of Sittings	Gold Standard		A-E pass rate	
Essential Journalism	1301	671	52%	1253	96%
Newspaper Magazine Regulation Test	1312	919	70%	1253	96%
Essential Media Law & Regulation	1232	783	64%	1094	89%
Court Reporting	955	640	67%	854	89%
Public Affairs	1084	704	65%	962	89%
Sports Journalism	223	137	61%	216	97%
Editing Skills for Journalists	209	151	72%	207	99%
Business of Magazines	9	5	56%	8	89%
Videojournalism for Digital Platforms	369	314	85%	359	97%
Business & Finance	14	11	79%	14	100%
PR & Communications for Journalists	42	21	50%	39	93%
Intro to PR for Journalists	50	21	42%	47	94%
Journalism for a Digital Audience	286	228	80%	278	97%
Data Journalism	50	34	68%	47	94%
Practical Magazine Journalism	110	95	86%	109	99%
Broadcast Journalism – TV News	128	96	75%	126	98%
Broadcast Journalism – Radio News	135	105	78%	129	96%
Broadcast Journalism – Regulation	166	134	81%	166	100%
Total no. of exam sittings	7675				

With the exception of intro to PR for journalists, 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 2021-22, 66 per cent of candidates achieved the gold standard compared with 65 per cent in 2020-21. Ninety-three per cent of candidates achieved A-E grades in 2021-22, compared with 92 per cent in 2020-21.

E-portfolios

In the 2021-22 academic year, 866 e-portfolios have been 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 2,701 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	1143	375	33%
80	443	128	29%
100	1070	187	17%
110	33	5	15%
120	12	3	25%
Total number of exam sittings	2701	698	26%

In 2021-22, 17 per cent achieved 100wpm compared to 21 per cent in 2020-21. Overall, the percentage pass rate for students achieving a shorthand speed of 60wpm or over decreased by four percentage points from 30 per cent to 26 per cent for the year.

Apprenticeships 2021-22

In 2021-22, a total of 124 apprentices were registered with the NCTJ on apprenticeship courses at the following centres: PA Training, City of Portsmouth College, Bauer Media, Cardiff and Vale College, University of Kent, City of Wolverhampton College, Glasgow Clyde College and Darlington College. Of these 124, 18 apprentices were registered on the level 7 senior journalist standard. The remaining 106 apprentices were registered on the level 3 junior journalist standard (prior to December 2021) or the new level 5 journalist standard (after December 2021). The level 3 junior journalist standard is no longer available for new registrations as of 31 December 2021.

34 end-point assessments were completed in the 2021-22 academic year. Of these 34, 30 were on the level 3 junior journalist standard and four were on the level 7 senior journalist standard. This was the NCTJ's first time delivering end-point assessments for the level 7 standard and all four candidates passed the EPA and achieved their apprenticeship. First end-point assessments for the level 5 journalist standard will be delivered in summer 2023.

National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ) 2021-22

During 2021-22, 91 candidates sat 205 NQJ examinations and assessments from November 2021 to July 2022 (including resits). Most NQJ exams delivered in 2021-22 were delivered remotely, with candidates able to sit them securely at home.

NQJ	Number of sittings	Number of passes	Pass rate
Practical skills	80	49	61%
Media law and ethics in practice	69	54	78%
e-Logbook	56	56	100%
Total no. of exam sittings	205	159	78%

Of the 91 candidates who sat the NQJ exams and assessments, 86 were working towards the full qualification. Over the year, a total of 47 candidates achieved the qualification, a pass rate of 55 per cent.

Student council feedback

The purpose of the 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 this year because of ongoing restrictions related to the pandemic, the NCTJ ran a virtual event over social media to hear from elected student representatives and distance learners and to give them the opportunity to question the NCTJ and experienced journalists.

The #NCTJStudentCouncil was run as a live event on Instagram on 4 March 2022 from midday. The event included a Q&A with students and the NCTJ team, plus the opportunity for attendees to hear advice from editors. The event also offered an opportunity for students to find out more about journalism careers and the free NCTJ resources available to them.

Ahead of the event, the NCTJ surveyed all elected student representatives, as well as those currently enrolled on the NCTJ's distance learning programme. This online survey gave students and distance learners the chance to feedback to the NCTJ about their training, the value of NCTJ accreditation and the support they receive, plus the opportunity to ask any questions they may have. These questions formed the basis of the Instagram Q&A. The NCTJ also put a call-out for questions on social media ahead of the event. The event was available for other students and prospective students to view, and was promoted to colleges around the UK should college students want to find out more about studying with the NCTJ.

Feedback from students

The online survey received a total of 43 responses from students on accredited courses, apprenticeships and the NCTJ's diploma distance learning programme.

What's good about the NCTJ?

- Employability
- The variety and relevance of modules
- The different courses/training routes available
- Adaptations and flexibility in response to the pandemic
- Support from course staff

What could be better about the NCTJ?

- More career advice and support
- NCTJ website and student resource area
- More communication with students
- Additional online resources
- Clearer information about the modules on their course, exam dates and e-portfolio
- Additional support and networking opportunities

NCTJ staff provided feedback in response to the above points on the website/student resources area, additional online resources and exam timetables.

Complaints

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

Three complaints were received by the NCTJ in 2021-22, a decrease of one compared to 2020-21.

One of the complaints made to the NCTJ in 2021-22 related to the content of an NCTJ exam, one related to a candidate's dissatisfaction with the delivery of training at their centre and the NCTJ's appeals process, and one related to a candidate's dissatisfaction with the delivery of exams at their centre.

There were no complaints reported to Ofqual about the NCTJ in 2021-22.

Reasonable adjustments and special considerations

In 2021-22, 170 candidates had reasonable adjustments approved for NCTJ examinations and/or assessments. This is a decrease of four candidates on 2020-21 figures, when 174 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 2021-22, the greatest number of reasonable adjustment approvals made were for candidates with dyslexia, learning difficulties, ADHD and anxiety/mental health conditions.

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 2021-22, which is the same number of appeals formerly investigated in 2020-21.

Appeals of assessment results

Seven of the appeals investigated during 2021-22 concerned individual candidate results. A total of 15 assessment results were reviewed on appeal and three were upheld, leading to an increase in the grade awarded.

All other appeals

There were three section B appeals submitted to the NCTJ during 2021-22. One related to the outcome of an NCTJ malpractice investigation, one related to decisions made by the NCTJ following a breach of procedure by a candidate during an NCTJ remote exam, and one related to the NCTJ's response to a complaint. There were no stage 2 appeals submitted to the NCTJ in 2021-22.

Exam incidents

Out of 12,114 assessments sat in 2021-22, there were a total of 27 incidents involving NCTJ exams. Out of these incidents, a total of 17 were connected to remote exam sittings, compared to 24 the previous year. All 17 incidents related to breaches of procedure by candidates during remote exams (some involving more than one centre/candidate). Of the remaining 10 incidents, two related to NCTJ results and certificates, three related to technical issues with the Cirrus assessment platform, two related to incidents with exam papers, two related to marking/moderation issues, and one related to an exam delivery error by a centre during an in-centre exam.

Spot checks

Since the introduction of remote exams, the NCTJ has been checking the Proctorio recordings for Cirrus exams based on suspicion level, RAG rating and any flags for suspicious end attempts and ID checks. We conducted Proctorio checks for 2,105 exams sat remotely in the 2021-22 academic year.

This year, we identified 17 breaches of procedure from these spot checks (some involving more than one candidate) which led to exams being declared null and void. We have also identified 15 instances of suspected candidate malpractice from these checks (some involving more than one candidate) which required investigation.

We also conducted sample spot checks on recordings for exams delivered remotely via Zoom. We did not identify any breaches of procedure from these checks.

We will continue to spot check remote exams using the process outlined above in 2022-23.

The NCTJ re-introduced traditional spot checks on in-centre exams in March 2022. Since then, spot checks have taken place at 13 in-centre exams. Three of those checks resulted in a fail due to exam procedures not being followed correctly. Feedback was provided to the centres via Creatio, and the centres will require an additional spot check in the 2022-23 academic year.

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 2021-22, 20 incidents of malpractice/maladministration were investigated. This is seven more than the number of incidents reported/investigated in 2020-21. This increase can be attributed to the delivery of remote exams throughout 2021-22, which are higher risk for malpractice/maladministration than exams delivered in-centre.

All 20 incidents investigated during this period involved suspected malpractice against individual candidates. This is nine more incidents than the number investigated in 2020-21. Following investigations, malpractice was confirmed in 15 of these incidents and sanctions were applied to the candidates. Five 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 no incidents of alleged malpractice or maladministration 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.

One of the cases investigated in 2021-22 involved an incident of certificate fraud by a former candidate, who admitted forging a qualification certificate and using it to gain employment. The fraud was discovered after a database check revealed that, though enrolled on two accredited courses, the candidate had never sat any NCTJ assessments. The candidate accepted their behaviour constituted malpractice under the NCTJ's malpractice and maladministration policy. The NCTJ carefully considered all relevant information before

reaching their decision in this case and imposing a sanction that was considered appropriate in all the circumstances – a ban of five years from all NCTJ-related activities. This ban should be taken as an indication of the seriousness of the offence and the NCTJ's determination to treat any similar breaches with the harshness they deserve.

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 here.

<https://www.nctj.com/about-nctj/policies>

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 2021-22 took place in October 2022. Areas of focus included governance, arrangements with third parties, setting and delivering assessments, marking, issuing results, appeals and certificates. Actions identified in the plan for 2022-23 relate to the following areas of the regulators' general conditions of recognition: conflicts of interest, malpractice/maladministration, special considerations, and marking and moderation. 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 2023.

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 one notification to Ofqual in 2021-22 of a potential adverse effect. This notification related to an incident of certificate fraud investigated as candidate malpractice. The regulators were kept up-to-date on the progress of our investigation and were notified of the investigation outcome and the sanctions applied.



NCTJ alumni Fadumo Olow reporting at Silverstone for Sky Sports

Principal examiner overview

It is both an honour and a source of great sadness to be asked to produce the annual overview of quality and standards at the NCTJ following the sad and untimely death of Sean Dooley. Sean chaired the Quality Assurance and Standards Committee since its inception in 2007 and brought great integrity and wisdom to the role.

The annual report on quality and standards underlines the NCTJ's adroitness in adapting to challenges such as delivering high quality training during a global pandemic and responding to rapid changes in the world of journalism.

It is evident from the annual report that the NCTJ's introduction of remote assessments has been a huge success, ensuring that students were not disadvantaged during the pandemic and were able to complete their diploma training without compromising on standards. 10,525 exams were delivered by the NCTJ last year, about 30 per cent of which were taken remotely. It is, therefore, hugely impressive that there were so few reported exam incidents and instances of alleged malpractice.

The breakdown of results for each NCTJ assessment in 2021-22, including comparisons with previous years, is also significant. The pass rates in 2020-21 and

2021-22 were clearly affected by the impact the pandemic had on the number of sittings. However, it is reassuring that standards remain high in 2021-22 and pass rates appear to be very comparable with pre-pandemic figures.

Although the NCTJ expects all assessments to be delivered in-centre in 2022-23, it is permitting some exceptions to this default position to enhance inclusivity and ensure that some candidates, for example those on remote courses and distance learners, are not disadvantaged. This is to be welcomed.

Innovation is also central to the NCTJ's enduring success. Each year the validity of assessment methods in all NCTJ modules is reviewed to maintain standards and ensure their currency and this has resulted in a redesign in some subject assessments. The NCTJ is also developing its suite of qualifications, including the foundation certificate, apprenticeships and the NQJ.

In its 70th year the data clearly demonstrates that the NCTJ's success is driven by its uncompromising commitment to continually improving standards and its willingness to embrace change in the face of a fast-changing media environment.

Amanda Ball
NCTJ principal examiner



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