



NCTJ Quality Assurance and Standards Committee Annual Report

2022-23



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Quality, trust and
diversity in journalism



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.

A number of areas are considered, monitored and discussed by the committee:

- 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 external quality assurance (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's principal examiner and members of the NCTJ's senior management team. It is chaired by an independent representative appointed by the NCTJ's main board of directors.

Following the death of Sean Dooley, the committee's 2022 meeting was chaired by the NCTJ's principal examiner Amanda Ball. Jonathan Baker was appointed chair of the committee in September 2023. Jonathan is an award-winning, NCTJ-qualified journalist, editor and journalism trainer who has worked in print, radio and television journalism. He was founding professor of journalism at the University of Essex, he received the NCTJ chairman's award for his outstanding contribution to journalism education and training, and is author of *Essential Journalism*, the NCTJ's guide for trainee journalists. Jonathan was a member of Ofcom's content board until September 2023.

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

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 coronavirus pandemic, the NCTJ put in place a contingency policy and plan which were regularly updated in response to guidance issued by the UK government and our regulators. From September 2022 all coronavirus restrictions were lifted, and no further temporary arrangements and adaptations for e-portfolio or coursework assessments were permitted.

In 2022-23 the NCTJ continued to offer the option of remote exams for candidates registered on remote courses accredited by the NCTJ, on apprenticeship courses and candidates who are distance learners sitting NCTJ national exams, including shorthand where applicable. Remote exam sittings are only available to candidates on accredited courses taught in person 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 unless there are exceptional circumstances that are discussed and agreed in advance with the NCTJ's assessment team.

Remote exams on Cirrus are invigilated by Proctorio, and those remote exams sat outside of Cirrus are invigilated via Zoom. Shorthand exams, which are comprised of an exam dictation outside of Cirrus and a transcription 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, while allowing candidates the opportunity to achieve their qualification by sitting exams at home.

Between October 2022 and July 2023, the NCTJ delivered approximately 10,771 exams.

This figure includes exams for all diploma subjects, including shorthand, and exams for the National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ). In comparison to the number of exams delivered in 2021-22, there has been a decrease of 537 exams sat.

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 was asked to be part of this, along with nine other awarding organisations.

The resulting report was published on the 18 July 2023 and can be found [here](#).

Qualification results analysis 2022-23

Certificate in Foundation Journalism

During 2022-23, 151 candidates submitted 539 unit assessments to the NCTJ for marking. This is compared to 95 candidates who submitted 449 unit assessments in the previous year. Of the 151 candidates who submitted this year, 125 were distance learners and 26 were on approved courses with training providers. Fifty-three candidates successfully completed the CFJ qualification in the 2022-23 academic year.

Diploma in Journalism

During 2022-23, 8,076 diploma examinations were sat. This includes resits but excludes shorthand. It is an increase of 401 sittings from exams sat in 2021-22, and 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 2022-23 academic year have been tabled below for each module of the Diploma in Journalism.

Diploma in Journalism (exam sittings) results summary 2022-23

Exam	No. of sittings 2022-23	Gold Standard 2022-23	A-E pass rate 2022-23
Essential Journalism	1254	55%	97%
Newspaper Magazine Regulation Test	1458	68%	94%
Essential Media Law & Regulation	1363	66%	89%
Court Reporting	867	64%	87%
Public Affairs	1076	58%	86%
Sports Journalism	238	62%	97%
Editing Skills for Journalists	246	72%	98%
Business of Magazines	2	50%	50%
Videojournalism for Digital Platforms	374	87%	99%
Business & Finance	13	92%	100%
PR & Communications for Journalists	24	58%	100%
Intro to PR for Journalists	61	48%	90%
Journalism for a Digital Audience	470	86%	99%
Data Journalism	70	54%	91%
Practical Magazine Journalism	136	92%	99%
Broadcast Journalism – TV News	104	86%	98%
Broadcast Journalism – Radio News	150	76%	83%
Broadcast Journalism – Regulation	170	85%	99%
Total no. of exam sittings	8076		

Over half of the exams marked in each module have been awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade, with the vast majority achieving an E grade or above. In 2022-23, 70 per cent of candidates achieved the gold standard in at least one diploma exam compared with 66 per cent in 2021-22. Ninety-two per cent of candidates achieved A-E in at least one diploma exam in 2022-23, compared to 93 per cent in 2021-22.

E-portfolios

In the 2022-23 academic year, 777 e-portfolios were submitted for assessment. This is 77 fewer than the previous year. Of these submissions, 93 per cent were awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade. In 2021-22, 94 per cent were awarded the gold standard.

Shorthand exams

During the 2022-23 academic year, 2695* shorthand exams (including resits) were held across speeds of 60 to 120 words per minute. The achievement figures for the year are tabled below.

Speed wpm	Number of exams held	Number of passes	Pass rate
60	1484	371	25%
80	279	74	27%
100	917	172	19%
110	11	4	36%
120	4	0	0%
Total no. of exams held	2695	621	23%

There was a 19 per cent pass rate at 100wpm compared to 17 per cent in 2021-22 - an increase of two percentage points. The pass rate at 60wpm decreased by eight percentage points from 33 per cent in 2021-22 to 25 per cent in 2022-23.

**The above figures are not the number of candidates studying shorthand, but the overall number of exams held.*

Apprenticeships

In 2022-23, a total of 152 apprentices were registered with the NCTJ on apprenticeship courses at the following centres: Cardiff and Vale College, Darlington College, PA Training, Bauer Academy, City of Portsmouth College, Bournemouth University in partnership with Bournemouth and Poole College, the University of Kent and the University of Sunderland. This is an increase of 28 apprentices from 2021-22.

Of these 152 apprentices, 61 apprentices were registered on the level 7 senior journalist standard and 91 were registered on the level 5 journalist standard. The level 3 content creator apprenticeship is a new standard for the NCTJ and to date, we have not registered any apprentices on it. In 2021-22, 18 apprentices were registered on the level 7 senior journalist standard and 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).

Fifty-four end-point assessments were completed in the 2022-23 academic year compared to 34 in 2021-22. Of these, 30 were on the level 3 junior journalist standard, 21 were on the level 5 journalist standard and three were on the level 7 senior journalist standard. In 2021-22, 30 were on the level 3 junior journalist standard and four were on the level 7 senior journalist standard.

National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ)

During 2022-23, a total of 150 candidates sat at least one NQJ exam component. Of these 150 candidates, 89 were working towards completing the full qualification. In 2021-22, 86 candidates were working towards the full qualification. Over three sittings of the NQJ exams held in March, July and November, a total of 56 candidates achieved the qualification - a pass rate of 63 per cent. This is an increase of eight per cent from 2021-22.

NQJ	Number of exams held	Number of passes	Pass rate
Practical Skills	97	65	67%
Media Law and Ethics in Practice	113	79	70%
E-Logbook	64	63	99%
Total no. of exams held	274	207	76%

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.

The NCTJ ran a webinar for the 2023 Student Council via Zoom to hear from elected student representatives and to give them the opportunity to question the NCTJ and experienced journalists. The event took place on 26 April 2023.

Students had a 'meet the editors' session as part of the event, where they were given the opportunity to put questions to Abbie Scott, then deputy managing editor of the *Financial Times*, and Steve Silk, assistant editor of BBC Look East. Questions mainly focused on employment opportunities and advice for new journalists.

There was an NCTJ Q&A session as part of the webinar, as well as an Instagram Live, where students were able to ask the NCTJ's principal examiner, senior staff and industry representatives, questions about the diploma and all aspects of their courses. During the webinar there was also the opportunity to take part in a group feedback exercise to discuss safety and resilience (dealing with difficult situations and distressing stories, online safety and resilience in newsrooms) and confidence building (training from home, working effectively from home, in-person work experience and future in-person jobs).



Feedback from students

An online survey received 53 responses from students on accredited courses, apprenticeships and the NCTJ's diploma distance learning programme.

What are the benefits of studying on an NCTJ-accredited course?

One of the most common responses was gaining an industry-recognised qualification that equips students with the 'useful' skills needed for a successful career in journalism. Students also said the standard of teaching was a 'professional experience' with 'high-quality' lecturers with 'industry knowledge'.

What would you like to see more of from the NCTJ during your studies?

- **56** per cent of accredited course students wanted more communication with students.
- **76** per cent of distance learners wanted more communication from the NCTJ.
- **36** per cent of accredited course students wanted additional online resources.
- **46** per cent of distance learners wanted more resources.
- **63** per cent of accredited course students wanted more career advice/support with jobs.
- **46** per cent of distance learners wanted more career advice/support with jobs.

Only nine apprentices responded to our survey. Over half of these wanted to see more communication from the NCTJ and additional online resources.

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

Complaints

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

Two complaints were received by the NCTJ in 2022-23, a decrease of one compared to 2021-22.

One of the complaints made to the NCTJ in 2022-23 related to a candidate's dissatisfaction with the student onboarding processes and tutor communications at their centre, and the NCTJ's Journalism Skills Academy login instructions and delivery of NCTJ books. The other related to a candidate's dissatisfaction with the cost of the distance learning course, exams and exam reports, the NCTJ's service as it relates to the distance learning course, their exam results and the NCTJ's customer service.

There were no complaints reported to Ofqual about the NCTJ in 2022-23.

Reasonable adjustments and special considerations

In 2022-23, 218 candidates had reasonable adjustments approved for NCTJ examinations and/or assessments. This is an increase of 48 candidates on 2021-22 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 2022-23, the greatest number of reasonable adjustment approvals made were for candidates with dyslexia, ADHD, specific learning difficulties, autism, dyspraxia 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. Section A appeals relate to assessment results and section B to other decisions taken by the NCTJ in any other circumstance. Stage one of a section A appeal is a review and re-mark of an assessment result. Stage two is an independent review of an assessment appeal.

In 2022-23 a total of 13 stage one appeals were submitted, three more than the number submitted in 2021-22. Of these 13, five were upheld.

Appeals of assessment results

Of these stage one appeals, 10 were appeals about assessment results. Across the academic year, appeals about assessment results increased by three compared to the number submitted in 2021-22.

All other appeals

There were three section B appeals submitted to the NCTJ during 2022-23, the same as in 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 two appeals submitted to the NCTJ in 2022-23.

Exam incidents

Out of 12,558 assessments sat in 2022-23, there were a total of 25 incidents involving NCTJ exams, compared to 27 incidents in 2021-22. Out of the 25 incidents recorded this year, 24 were connected to remote exam sittings, compared to 17 the previous year.

Spot checks

Since the introduction of remote exams, the NCTJ has been checking the Proctorio recordings for Cirrus exams based on suspicion level, a RAG (red, amber, green) rating and any flags and ID checks. We conducted Proctorio checks for 1,273 exams sat remotely in the 2022-23 academic year. This is 832 fewer than were checked in the 2021-22 academic year, due to fewer remote exam sittings.

This year, we identified 11 breaches of procedure from these spot checks (some involving more than one candidate) which led to exams being declared null and void, compared to 17 in 2021-22. We have also identified 13 instances of suspected candidate malpractice from these checks which required investigation, compared to 15 in 2021-22.

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 2023-24.

The NCTJ re-introduced traditional spot checks on in-centre exams in March 2022. In 2022-23, spot checks were made on 24 in-centre exams. Seven of those checks resulted in a pass with conditions due to minor concerns/breaches of procedure. Feedback was provided to the centres via the NCTJ Creatio platform. No checks resulted in a fail.

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 2022-23, 14 incidents of malpractice/maladministration were investigated. This is six fewer than the number of incidents reported/ investigated in 2021-22. This decrease can be attributed to the NCTJ's new policy of running fewer remote sittings, which was introduced in September 2022. Of the 14 incidents investigated this year, 13 were incidents of suspected or actual candidate malpractice involving remote exams.

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 was one incident of centre maladministration during this period. 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 are also reviewed to ensure a fair and consistent approach is taken to each case.

Conflicts of interest

Key stakeholder organisations, 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](#):

Annual self-evaluation

To ensure that our systems of internal control continue to be robust and effective, the NCTJ has an annual self-evaluation process in place to monitor 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. It considers evidence of the NCTJ's compliance with certain areas of the regulators' conditions of recognition and has oversight of the NCTJ risk register. Any observations and recommendations from this audit are logged in an internal self-evaluation action plan which is implemented to strengthen and enhance our processes and procedures as an awarding organisation. 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.

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, marking and moderation. This plan is reviewed monthly by NCTJ staff to ensure actions are completed by the dates specified. Our annual audit for 2023 took place in October and will be reported on in our 2023-24 report.

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:

- There has been a loss or theft of, or a breach of confidentiality in, any assessment materials
- The awarding organisation believes 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, Qualifications Wales or CCEA in 2022-23 of a potential adverse effect.



Chairman's overview

This review covers the first full year of 'normal' operations following the Covid-19 pandemic. The remote sitting of exams introduced to ensure continuity during the pandemic has now been scaled back once again. There has been a remarkable consistency of results over the past three to four years, which attests to the agility and effectiveness of the NCTJ response. However, the possibility of a future pandemic has been added to the risk register, and the NCTJ maintains a contingency plan based on the previous experience.

The NCTJ's default position now is that all exams will take place in-centre. Individual candidates with specific needs or circumstances can still apply for reasonable adjustments, which are considered on a case-by-case basis. The number of applications for such adjustments continues to rise, by almost 30 per cent in 2022-23 by comparison with the previous year.

The annual independent audit conducted in autumn 2022 described the NCTJ as "a reflective organisation seeking continual improvement with a culture of careful and systematic planning". The reports presented to the committee provided ample evidence of a well-run, well-organised, transparent, confident and self-aware operation. Such is the range of policies and protocols in all the appropriate areas, and the prompt handling of issues and problems when they arose, that the committee had no major concerns about the health and wellbeing of the organisation.

There was a detailed discussion about the perennial issue of shorthand. Fewer students are now electing to take shorthand as part of their diploma, and those who do frequently experience difficulty in passing even at 60 words per minute, well short of the target rate of 100.

The committee noted approvingly the increased uptake in data journalism and journalism for a digital

audience. Both modules reflect the current direction of travel in the industry. AI tools are increasingly used in researching and creating content and have been included in the diploma syllabus. The committee noted the need to watch developments in this area in the context of students misusing these tools in their NCTJ assessments. This issue will be added to the risk register, although the threat is currently assessed as low due to the nature of the Diploma in Journalism's assessments.

The 2023 Student Council event provided useful feedback on the importance of resilience, students' mental health and operating safely online. Over the last 12 months the NCTJ has increased its work in this area to support the delivery of safety and resilience training on NCTJ-accredited courses. Safety and resilience training is mandatory on all accredited courses, and the NCTJ has delivered tutor workshops and provided a free e-learning resource on the Journalism Skills Academy which is available to all students.

Following the introduction of its new examinations database, the NCTJ will be exploring new ways to record students' ethnicity on accredited courses. The NCTJ currently requests this data on a voluntary basis via centre registrations, but it is now harder to collate and not all centres have been able to provide it. The data is invaluable in assessing overall levels of diversity across accredited courses, and so efforts will be made to find alternative ways of seeking this information, again on a voluntary basis.

The committee commended the whole NCTJ team for its continuing commitment to fairness, transparency and high standards, and its determination to respond to new trends in a dynamic and ever-changing industry.

Jonathan Baker

Chairman, quality assurance and standards committee



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