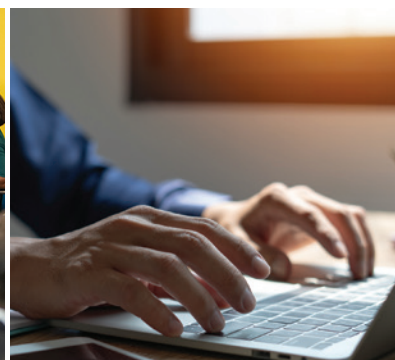
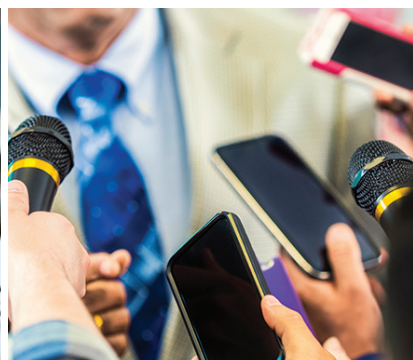





# NCTJ Quality Assurance and Standards Committee Annual Report

2023-24



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**nctj**  
Quality, trust and  
diversity in journalism

A photograph of four people (three women and one man) sitting in a modern office setting with large windows overlooking a city skyline. They are engaged in a discussion. Two small round tables with water bottles and glasses are in front of them. The word 'Introduction' is overlaid in white text on the bottom left of the image.

## Introduction

**The NCTJ quality assurance and standards (QA&S) committee meets annually, or more frequently when required, to oversee quality, standardisation and fairness across all qualifications.**

Areas considered, monitored and discussed by the committee include:

- standardisation
- results analysis
- exam incidents
- customer service – centre and learner feedback, complaints
- equal opportunities
- reasonable adjustments and special considerations
- appeals
- suspected malpractice and maladministration
- compliance with Ofqual, CCEA (Northern Ireland) and Qualifications Wales' general conditions of recognition
- 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 board of directors. The post is currently held by Jonathan Baker. Jonathan is an award-winning, NCTJ-qualified journalist, editor and journalism trainer who has worked across 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 high journalism education and training, and is author of *Essential Journalism*, the NCTJ 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.

# Qualification results analysis 2023-24

## Certificate in Foundation Journalism

Number of CFJ candidates, unit assessments submitted and candidates who completed the CFJ in 2023-24 and 2022-23, for comparison, are shown below:

|   | 2023-24 | 2022-23 |
|---|---------|---------|
| Number of candidates registered on courses at an approved centre              | 33      | 26      |
| Number of candidates registered as distance learners                          | 62      | 125     |
| Total number of candidates who submitted unit assessments to NCTJ for marking | 95      | 151     |
| Total number of unit assessments submitted to NCTJ for marking                | 392     | 539     |
| Total number of candidates who completed the full CFJ qualification           | 40      | 53      |

## Diploma in Journalism

During 2023-24, 8,550 diploma examinations (excluding shorthand) were sat (including resits). This is an increase of 476 sittings from exams sat in 2022-23. Overall achievement figures for the 2023-24 academic year have been tabled below for each module of the Diploma in Journalism.

### Diploma in Journalism (exam sittings) results summary

| Exam                                  | No. of Sittings | Gold Standard |     | A-E pass rate |      |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|-----|---------------|------|
| Essential Journalism                  | 1392            | 734           | 53% | 1338          | 96%  |
| Newspaper Magazine Regulation Test    | 1217            | 818           | 67% | 1155          | 95%  |
| Essential Media Law & Regulation      | 1325            | 874           | 66% | 1167          | 88%  |
| Court Reporting                       | 767             | 548           | 71% | 700           | 91%  |
| Public Affairs                        | 1019            | 655           | 64% | 922           | 90%  |
| Sports Journalism                     | 318             | 207           | 65% | 315           | 99%  |
| Editing Skills for Journalists        | 237             | 173           | 73% | 234           | 99%  |
| Videojournalism for Digital Platforms | 608             | 549           | 90% | 608           | 100% |
| Business & Finance                    | 9               | 8             | 89% | 9             | 100% |
| PR & Communications for Journalists   | 125             | 88            | 70% | 123           | 98%  |
| Intro to PR for Journalists           | 104             | 65            | 63% | 100           | 96%  |
| Journalism for a Digital Audience     | 535             | 458           | 86% | 533           | 100% |
| Data Journalism                       | 241             | 155           | 64% | 237           | 98%  |
| Practical Magazine Journalism         | 184             | 159           | 86% | 184           | 100% |
| Broadcast Journalism – TV News        | 89              | 78            | 88% | 87            | 98%  |
| Broadcast Journalism – Radio News     | 136             | 132           | 97% | 136           | 100% |
| Broadcast Journalism – Regulation     | 244             | 213           | 87% | 240           | 98%  |
| <b>Total no. of exam sittings</b>     | <b>8550</b>     |               |     |               |      |

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.

### E-portfolios

In the 2022-23 academic year, 840 e-portfolios were submitted for assessment. This is an increase of 63 compared to the previous year. Of these submissions, 95 per cent were awarded the industry gold standard of an A-C grade. In 2022-23, 93 percent were awarded the gold standard.

## Shorthand exams

The number of sittings, passes and pass rates for each shorthand speed for 2023-24 are shown below:

| Speed        | Number of sittings | Number of passes | Pass rate  |
|--------------|--------------------|------------------|------------|
| 60           | 1426               | 381              | 27%        |
| 80           | 409                | 123              | 30%        |
| 100          | 749                | 121              | 16%        |
| 110          | 13                 | 2                | 15%        |
| 120          | 11                 | 3                | 27%        |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>2608</b>        | <b>630</b>       | <b>24%</b> |

There was a 16 per cent pass rate at 100wpm compared to 19 per cent in 2022-23 – a decrease of three percentage points. The pass rate at 60wpm increased by two percentage points from 25 per cent in 2022-23 to 27 per cent in 2023-24.

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

## Apprenticeships

Number of apprentices in 2023-24 and 2022-23, for comparison, are shown below:

|   | 2023-24    | 2022-23    |
|---|------------|------------|
| Number of apprentices registered on the L7 senior journalist standard | 63         | 61         |
| Number of apprentices registered on the L5 journalist standard        | 88         | 91         |
| <b>Total number of apprentices registered</b>                         | <b>151</b> | <b>152</b> |

Number of end-point assessments submitted in 2023-24 and 2022-23, for comparison, are shown below:

|   | 2023-24   | 2022-23   |
|---|-----------|-----------|
| Number of L7 senior journalist standard end-point assessments completed | 28        | 3         |
| Number of L5 senior journalist standard end-point assessments completed | 46        | 21        |
| Number of L3 junior journalist standard end-point assessments completed | 14        | 30        |
| <b>Total number of end-point assessments completed</b>                  | <b>88</b> | <b>54</b> |

## National Qualification in Journalism (NQJ)

During 2023-24, a total of 129 candidates were working towards completing the full qualification. In 2022-23, 89 candidates were working towards the full qualification.

Over three sittings of the NQJ exams held in March, July and November, a total of 86 candidates achieved the qualification – a pass rate of 67 per cent. This is an increase of four percentage points from 2022-23.

The results below summarise the breakdown of NQJ results by exam section in 2023-24:

| NQJ                               | No. of sittings | Number of passes | Pass rate |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------|
| Media Law and Ethics in Practice  | 134             | 92               | 69%       |
| Practical journalism skills exams | 109             | 56               | 51%       |
| E-logbook                         | 89              | 89               | 100%      |
| <b>Total no. of exam sittings</b> | <b>332</b>      |                  |           |



## Student Council feedback

The purpose of the council is to provide a forum for students to tell the NCTJ 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's Student Council 2024 took place on Friday, 9 February at the *Financial Times* in London. More than 40 representatives, elected by their peers, attended the event. It was the first in-person Student Council held by the NCTJ since the onset of the Covid pandemic.

The first session was an NCTJ Q&A session, where students were able to ask the NCTJ's principal examiner, and NCTJ senior team questions about the diploma and all aspects of their courses. The second session of the day was a round-table discussion. The NCTJ asked the student representatives in attendance to share their feedback and ideas on three topics:

- 1. How the NCTJ communicates with learners**
- 2. What parts of their NCTJ training has been most valuable**
- 3. What skills training would they like more of**

The final session of the day was a careers panel, chaired by Rukasana Bhaijee, global head of diversity, equity and inclusion at the *Financial Times*. She was joined by: Paddy Davitt, football editor at Newsquest; Jay Gardner, BBC journalism trainee; Luke Jacobs, homepages/digital editor at *The Guardian*; Michelle Johnson, editorial director at Vantage Media; and Mark Waldron, publishing editor of National World. This gave the students and apprentices the opportunity to ask questions of and network with working journalists.

Student discussions centred around the diploma and areas where additional training would be beneficial, with the final session focusing on employability after completing their NCTJ training.

## Complaints

### Three complaints were received by the NCTJ in 2023-24.

One of the complaints made to the NCTJ in 2023-24 related to a candidate not receiving a qualification certificate due to a qualification being withdrawn. The NCTJ resolved this by providing the candidate with a letter of achievement in place of the certificate. Another complaint related to the delivery of NCTJ examinations at an individual centre, the complaint was not upheld, and the candidate was advised to raise their concerns directly with the centre. The third complaint concerned a client's dissatisfaction with a bespoke JSA training course. The complaint was upheld, and the client received an apology and a full refund for the training.

There was one complaint reported to Ofqual about the NCTJ in 2023-24. The complaint concerned the outcome of a suspected malpractice investigation.

## Reasonable adjustments and special considerations

The NCTJ welcomes and is sensitive to candidates with particular needs, and encourages them to take NCTJ examinations and assessments. Where required, the needs of candidates are addressed on a case-by-case basis. 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. The NCTJ's policy concerning the application of reasonable adjustments can be found [here](#).

In 2023-24, 267 candidates had reasonable adjustments approved for NCTJ examinations and/or assessments.

In 2023-24, 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.

In 2022-23 a total of 16 appeals were submitted, three more than the number submitted in 2022-23. Of these 16, four were successfully upheld. Eight of the appeals were about assessment results and eight were related to decisions made by the NCTJ following a breach of procedure by a candidate during an NCTJ remote exam. There was one independent review of an assessment appeal submitted to the NCTJ in 2023-24 which was not upheld.

## Exam incidents

A total of 13,043 assessments were sat in 2023-24. The table below shows the number of exam incidents in 2023-24 and 2022-23, for comparison:

|  | 2023-24   | 2022-23   | Difference between 23/24 and 22/23 |
|--|-----------|-----------|------------------------------------|
| Breach of remote exams procedures (exams declared null and void) | 68        | 23        | +45                                |
| Minor exam setting error   | 1         | 0         | +1                                 |
| Technical issues   | 5         | 1         | +4                                 |
| Other  | 0         | 1         | -1                                 |
| <b>Total number of incidents</b>                                 | <b>74</b> | <b>24</b> | <b>+50</b>                         |

## Spot checks

For exams held remotely, the NCTJ checks the Proctorio recordings for Cirrus exams based on suspicion level, RAG rating and any flags for suspicious end attempts and ID checks. The NCTJ conducted Proctorio checks for 1059 exams sat remotely in the 2023-24 academic year. This is 214 less than were checked in the 2022-23 academic year.

This year, the NCTJ identified 68 breaches of procedure from these spot checks which led to exams being declared null and void, compared to 23 in 2022-23. The NCTJ also identified eight instances of suspected candidate malpractice from these checks which required investigation, compared to 13 in 2022-23.

The NCTJ also conducted sample spot checks on recordings for exams delivered remotely via Zoom. There were no breaches of procedure identified from these checks.

The NCTJ will continue to spot check remote exams using the process outlined above in 2024-25.

Spot checks on in-centre exams were carried out on all centres running courses in 2023-24. Three spot checks resulted in a pass with conditions due to minor concerns/breaches of procedure. 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.

The number of suspected malpractice and maladministration cases investigated in 2023-24 and 2022-23, for comparison, are shown below:

|  |  | Cases<br>2023-24 | Cases<br>2022-23 | Difference between<br>23/24 and 22/23 |
|--|--|------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Malpractice –<br>Individual<br>candidates                            | Distance learners                            | 4                | 4                | 0                                     |
|  | On accredited courses, including apprentices | 8                | 9                | -1                                    |
| Maladministration – centres  |  | 1                | 1                | 0                                     |
| <b>Total number of suspected malpractice/maladministration cases</b> |  | <b>13</b>        | <b>14</b>        | <b>-1</b>                             |

With regards to malpractice, eight incidents involved remote exams, and four incidents involved exams delivered in-centre (or other assessments e.g. e-portfolio).

The incident of maladministration by a centre during this period, related to the delivery of a remote exam at the centre.

In all cases, investigations were carried out by the NCTJ and, where applicable, sanctions were applied e.g. exams were declared null and void, candidates were banned from sitting exams remotely. 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.

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 [here](#).

## Annual self-evaluation

To ensure that 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 certain areas of the regulators' conditions of recognition, with 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 AO processes and procedures. 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 2024-25 took place in October 2024. Areas of focus were organisational stability, resilience arrangements with centres and provision of reasonable adjustments in accordance with equalities legislation. Actions identified in the plan for 2023-24 relate to the following areas of the regulators' general conditions of recognition: identification and management of risks, malpractice/maladministration, arrangements with centres and registration of learners. This action plan is reviewed monthly by all NCTJ staff to ensure that actions are completed by the dates specified.

## 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 four notifications to Ofqual, Qualifications Wales and CCEA in 2023-24.

One notification was in relation to the incident of centre maladministration at a centre. The regulators were kept up-to-date on the progress of our investigation and were notified of the investigation outcome and the sanctions applied.

Two of the notifications were concerns the NCTJ had about the requirements outlined in the assessment plans for the level 3 content creator, level 5 journalist and level 7 senior journalist apprenticeship standards. Ofqual acknowledged the concerns and confirmed they had reported these to IfATE.

One notification concerned a delay in issuing CFJ qualification assessment results for ten candidates. This was an isolated incident, and action has been taken to prevent this from happening again. Ofqual stated that this issue was in breach of Condition H6 due to the delay in issuing results and formally recorded the event as non-compliance. Ofqual closed the event notification with no further action.



## Report from the chair of the committee

**The independent external audit conducted for the NCTJ in 2024 found the organisation to be in rude health. It was found to be fully compliant across 10 principal conditions of recognition and was described as “robust and fit for purpose”. This was a welcome endorsement of the processes and protocols that the NCTJ has in place across the full range of its awarding activities. Recommendations from the auditor have been incorporated into the NCTJ’s self-evaluation action plan for the year ahead. Most of them relate to streamlining processes by simplifying the wording of some policies and eliminating overlap. The committee was pleased with the auditor’s report and the NCTJ’s positive response to its findings.**

The committee examined in detail the performance of the NCTJ in 2023/4 against its strategy and policies. Although some perennial issues continue to defy solution, there were no significant concerns about any area of activity.

Exam results were broadly in line with previous years in terms of overall numbers and the proportion of gold standard and A-E results. The committee was pleased to note significant take-up in modules concerned with more recent developments in journalism, such as data journalism (numbers more than trebled) and videojournalism for digital platforms (numbers almost doubled).

We remain concerned about two linked areas: shorthand and court reporting. The number of shorthand passes, even at the minimum rate of 60wpm, is still only 27 per cent. The reasons for this are well known: fewer students opting to take

shorthand now it is no longer a compulsory element of the diploma; a lack of staying power among those who do; a widespread view that it is not necessary for a career in journalism; the dearth of shorthand tutors. Nothing has changed during the period under review, in spite of NCTJ research suggesting that shorthand is required or strongly desired by 80 per cent of employers. There is no plan to abandon shorthand given its widespread continued use.

The lack of journalists with good shorthand is thought to be a contributory factor in the shortage of dedicated court reporters, and indeed of general reporters who are sufficiently competent to be assigned to coverage of the courts. The numbers taking the court reporting module are well down. An industry initiative along the lines of the local democracy project might be required to reverse this position.

The NCTJ remains determined to stay on the front foot in its response to the opportunities and challenges presented by the development of artificial intelligence. There are two aspects to this: ensuring that students do not use AI improperly in assessments; and making sure that the NCTJ syllabus takes account of, and keeps pace with, the use of AI in journalism production. There is little evidence so far of the former, although that may change, and new tools to aid detection are under consideration. New guidelines have been circulated to centres. As for the syllabus, the Essential Journalism module now contains AI elements and there is an e-learning course on the Journalism Skills Academy site. These twin issues will be an important focus for the NCTJ in the next period.

At a special meeting in June 2024, the committee reviewed the arrangements for remote sittings. It decided not to ban mobile phones for these exams because of the potential need for the candidates to seek help in case of technical problems; nor to increase the number of room scans required. The committee decided to ban candidates from having notepaper to hand, and to investigate further the possibility of installing an extra camera in the room.

All the figures relating to exam incidents, malpractice, maladministration, complaints and appeals were considered to be satisfactory. In all cases they represented a very small fraction of total activity (usually much less than one per cent) and were dealt with efficiently and fairly. Concern was expressed at the amount of time consumed in investigating quite minor breaches, an issue that might be exacerbated if AI-related malpractice starts to creep in. It was felt there was little alternative but to continue investigation on this basis.

The committee discussed the disappointing amount of feedback from consumers. Very few questionnaires are returned – certainly not enough from which to draw wider conclusions. Various

options were discussed. The best feedback comes from students interviewed face to face at centre accreditation visits. The student council meeting produced a number of useful suggestions relating to the way the NCTJ communicates with students.

The poor returns on equal opportunities monitoring was also lamented. The NCTJ currently requests this data on a voluntary basis via centre registrations, but not all centres have been able to provide it. This yielded no useful data, and although we need to keep asking, it is clear that our current method is not serving its purpose.

These are minor concerns set across the whole sweep of the NCTJ's activities, and the means by which it measures and records its own performance. The committee congratulated the entire NCTJ team for its work and its continued dedication to excellence.

***Jonathan Baker***

Chairman, quality assurance and standards committee



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