

Perceptions and experiences of grading in summer 2021: Research with education professionals in Wales



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Opinion Research Services

The Strand Swansea SA1 1AF

01792 535300 | www.ors.org.uk | info@ors.org.uk

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1. Glossary

Acronym / Key word	Definition
ALN	Additional Learning Needs
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CDG	Centre Determined Grades
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DDAG	Welsh Government Design and Delivery Advisory Group
FE	Further Education
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
JCQ	Joint Council for Qualifications
NEA	Non-Examination Assessment
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
SCC	Skills Challenge Certificate
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENco	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
QW	Qualifications Wales
Welsh Bacc	Welsh Baccalaureate
WJEC	Welsh Joint Education Committee: WJEC CBAC Limited (Awarding body)

2. Introduction

2.1. Background to the project

2.1.1. Disruption to teaching and learning due to COVID-19 pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, learners in Wales have suffered significant disruption to their teaching and learning since March 2020. In summary:

- Schools and colleges were closed to all learners, except those who were considered vulnerable or whose parents were keyworkers, between March and June 2020.
- Some learners experienced disruption between September and December 2020 due to regional or local lockdowns or identified cases of COVID-19 within their cohort or 'learning bubble', leading to a period of self-isolation being required.
- Schools and colleges were closed to all learners, except those who were considered vulnerable or whose parents were keyworkers, from 4 January 2021. Many learners due to complete qualifications in summer 2021 did not start to return to face-to-face education until mid-March 2021.

2.1.2. Summer 2021 assessments: General Qualifications¹

This disruption to teaching and learning, combined with the ongoing uncertainty regarding the spread of the virus and the associated feasibility of holding exams in summer 2021, led the Welsh Government Minister for Education to publish a [written statement](#) on 20 January 2021. The policy stated that learners completing approved GCSE, AS or A level qualifications in summer 2021 would have their qualifications awarded through a centre determined grade (CDG) model. Qualifications Wales decided to regulate these qualifications in line with this policy intention.

Due to the variation in teaching and learning across centres and the potential difficulties in delivering standardised assessments like exams to a national cohort during the pandemic, the policy stated that centres would have the flexibility to determine grades based on their own assessment approach rather than have learners complete standardised assessments. As part of the quality assurance process, centres would submit their proposed assessment approach to the awarding body, WJEC-CBAC (WJEC). WJEC would produce training, guidance, adapted past papers, and qualification assessment frameworks to help centres to complete assessments and award grades. Although quality assurance processes would be put in place, WJEC would not change the grades themselves. The [Design and Delivery Advisory Group](#) were asked to work with Qualifications Wales and WJEC in developing and setting out the Assessment Framework and the quality assurance processes.

On 9 February 2021, Qualifications Wales confirmed that the Skills Challenge Certificate (SCC) (Welsh Baccalaureate) qualifications would also be awarded through centre determined grades.

¹ General Qualifications comprise GCSEs, AS levels, A levels, and the Welsh Baccalaureate.

2.1.3. Summer 2021 assessments: Vocational Qualifications

Many vocational qualifications taken in Wales are also taken by learners in England and Northern Ireland. As a result, Qualifications Wales worked closely with the regulators in these countries to agree an approach to awarding these qualifications. For consistency, Qualifications Wales also ensured that those vocational qualifications that are only available in Wales, such as Essential Skills and those in Health and Social Care, and Childcare, were awarded in a similar way. This approach was announced on 25 February 2021.

The approach differed slightly depending on the type of vocational qualification. In summary:

- Learners who took qualifications which are similar to A levels or GCSEs, such as BTECs², WJEC Vocational Awards, Applied Certificates and Diplomas, or the new Health and Social Care: Principles and Contexts qualifications, were awarded a centre determined grade based on a range of assessment information.
- Some qualifications support progression to further study or employment but are not similar to GCSEs or A levels. Exams and assessments for these qualifications continued where it was safe to do so, remotely or in person. If learners were unable to take the assessment when they needed to, then alternative arrangements were available to give them every chance to progress. As an example, assessments for Essential Skills Wales qualifications continued to be available, but if learners could not take the assessments due to the impact of COVID-19, centres were able to give them a grade based on their judgement of the available evidence.
- Learners who took a qualification that required them to demonstrate practical skills, such as plumbing, construction, performing arts or hairdressing, needed to be assessed on their practical skills to achieve their qualification. Assessments continued as normal, using the adaptations, where possible and in line with Welsh Government's operational guidance.

2.2. Research requirements

Qualifications Wales was keen to explore the perceptions and experiences of teachers, lecturers and heads of centre who were involved in making or overseeing grading decisions. Qualifications Wales therefore commissioned a two-stage research project, involving:

- An online survey of those involved in grading decisions for qualifications due to be awarded in summer 2021; and
- Follow-up semi-structured interviews with 30 respondents to explore their views in more depth.

2.2.1. Research objectives

The research aimed to help Qualifications Wales, and the wider education system, understand as much as possible about the process of awarding centre determined grades and what can be learned from it.

The specific research objectives involved exploring centre staff's views on:

² BTEC is a brand of vocational qualification offered by Pearson.

- What evidence was considered when making judgements and why; how many assessments learners needed to complete in spring/summer 2021 to enable a centre determined grade to be awarded and whether this was considered to be appropriate; and whether there was any type of evidence teachers or lecturers would have liked to have used but were not able to.
- How teachers or lecturers within centres worked together to determine grades and if they faced any challenges during these discussions; whether they collaborated with other centres to discuss grading or to standardise grades; and how manageable and effective the internal standardisation process was.
- How manageable the process of determining the grades was and whether there was any impact on personal wellbeing; how manageable it was to oversee the process of determining grades; and whether there was any pressure from external sources and what impact this had.
- How clear, effective, and useful the grade descriptors were; and how teachers and lecturers found the process of awarding a holistic academic judgement based on these grade descriptors.
- How useful and effective the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales and WJEC was; whether centres provided additional training and support to teaching staff; whether there were gaps in the training and guidance provided; whether teachers, lecturers and centres were clear about their roles and responsibilities throughout the process.
- How confident teachers, lecturers and centres felt about the grades that they were awarding; how did these grades compare with predicted grades for university applications and did they get a sense that learners were expecting their final grade would reflect their predicted grade; how confident were heads of centre that the grades were fair and free from bias within their centre and across other centres.
- Whether the approach advantaged or disadvantaged some learners more than others, and if so, how.
- Experiences and perceptions of the effectiveness of the external quality assurance process.
- What worked well and what lessons can be learned, particularly in relation to the potential merits and challenges of such an approach when considering how qualifications could be designed in the future to support the new Curriculum for Wales; how would centre staff like to see teacher assessment used in the future; what should future quality assurance processes of teacher assessment look like; and how CDG processes might be improved.

2.3. Methodology

As noted, the research comprised an online survey and 30 depth interviews.

2.3.1. The online survey

All centre staff who were involved in grading in summer 2021 were invited to take part in the online survey. A copy of the survey is provided in the appendix.

ORS designed the online survey in partnership with Qualifications Wales. It was open between 14 September and 8 October 2021. Qualifications Wales' External Relations Team circulated the link to the survey to examinations officers at all eligible centres, requesting that they circulate it to all relevant staff within their centres. This activity was supported by a broader communications campaign which involved sharing links to the survey via social media posts, Qualifications Wales' newsletter The Slate, and Welsh Government's education and training newsletter, Dysg.



ORS received just under 400 responses to the online survey with a good spread of roles and responsibilities. However, as this was a self-selecting methodology, the sample cannot be considered as representative of all staff across all centres in Wales. The survey included filter questions to guide people on whether they were eligible to take part and the dataset was checked for duplicate responses which could potentially skew the findings, but none were found. A full profile of respondents is available in appendix 1.

As is typical in a self-completion exercise, some respondents skipped certain questions or did not finish the survey. A decision was taken to include partial responses within the analysis if respondents had completed at least the first full question on the survey. This means the sample size is not consistent throughout the report and falls slightly towards the end of the survey. The questionnaire took an average of 22 minutes to complete. It was recognised at the beginning of the project that this is fairly long, but it was felt that all the material needed to be covered. Our analysis of responses did not identify any single questions as having high dropout rates.

When prompted, all survey respondents confirmed which type of centre they worked in. Just over three in four (77%) were based in maintained secondary schools (including sixth forms). Eleven per cent were based in Further Education (FE) colleges, and 8% were based in independent schools. Very few respondents worked in other centre types, such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), adult learning centres, or maintained special schools.

Type of school	Number of respondents
Maintained secondary school (including sixth forms)	304
Further Education (FE) College	42
Independent school	32

Pupil Referral Unit	8
Other	9
TOTAL	395

Respondents held a range of different job roles. Heads of Department made up 45% of the sample, whilst one in three (33%) described themselves as teachers or lecturers.

Job role	Number of respondents
Head of Department	178
Teacher, lecturer, tutor, or trainer	129
Deputy/Assistant Head of Centre	31
Deputy/Assistant Head of Department	26
Head of Centre	10
Head of sixth form	6
Key Stage Leader	5
Exams Officer / Manager	4
SENCo/other SEN or ALN specialist	2
Other	2
Not answered	2
TOTAL	395

Just over a third of respondents (36%) said that they had over 20 years' teaching experience. Around a quarter (26%) had between 11 and 20 years' experience.

Length of time teaching	Number of respondents
Less than 2 years	2
2- 5 years	14
6 – 10 years	54
11 – 20 years	101
More than 20 years	141
Not answered	83
TOTAL	395

Similar proportions of respondents said that they were involved in grading and standardisation for GCSEs, AS levels, and A levels, although fewer said that they were involved in standardisation relative to grading for vocational qualifications.

Subject level	Involved in Grading	Involved in Standardisation
GCSE	325	318
AS level	225	212
A level	229	219

Vocational	92	69
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Respondents were asked where they were based. This was an optional question, so not everyone responded. However, a good spread of responses was received from across Wales.

Region	Number of respondents
South Central (Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Vale of Glamorgan)	91
South East (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, and Torfaen)	53
West (Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys, and Swansea)	98
North (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, and Wrexham)	67
Not answered	86
TOTAL	395

2.3.2. The interviews

ORS researchers conducted 30 follow-up depth interviews in total. A copy of the topic guide which lists the interview questions is included in the appendix. Most of these questions referred back to interviewees' survey responses and explored them in more depth, although some interview questions were not covered in the survey, and vice versa.

Twenty-five interviews were conducted in English, and five were conducted in Welsh, to reflect the proportions of English-medium and Welsh-medium schools in Wales. Each interview took around an hour and was conducted over Microsoft Teams or the telephone.

The interview sample included roughly equal proportions of interviewees from across Wales' education consortia. Interviewees held a mix of roles, and career durations.

Twenty four interviewees worked at maintained secondary schools; two were employed by independent schools; and four were based at Further Education (FE) Colleges. These numbers were roughly based on the current proportions of these centre types in Wales.

2.3.3. Ethical considerations

As this report shows, the 2021 grading process was challenging for centre staff. ORS and Qualifications Wales therefore anticipated that some staff may find discussing their experiences of it emotive.

To mitigate this, ORS provided detailed information about the project and about the interview prior to recruiting interviewees. This helped to ensure that prospective interviewees understood the project remit, and the topic areas that would be covered in the interview. ORS's researchers also emphasised at the pre-recruitment stage and at the start of each interview that interviewees did not have to answer every question.

2.3.4. Strengths and limitations of the research

The main strengths of the research are that:

- The mixed method approach gathered a mix of quantitative and qualitative data which provides detailed insight into centre staff's views on the 2021 grading process and the 2022 assessment arrangements.
- The research was conducted at a pivotal time for centres in Wales in terms of the status of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the delivery of teaching and learning. The findings will be useful for evaluating the 2021 centre determined grading approach.
- The online survey was open to education professionals in all centres that graded for academic and vocational qualifications across Wales. Interviews were conducted with staff drawn from a mix of the main centre types throughout Wales. Although the findings are not representative of all centres in Wales, they convey a broad range of views from different centre types throughout the country.

The main limitations of the research are that:

- The online survey was circulated to all centres that were involved in grading and was publicised appropriately. However, participation was voluntary and self-selecting, meaning that some groups may be less represented than others.
- Qualifications Wales does not have a direct email address for all eligible staff, so invitations to participate were sent indirectly via centres, which could have resulted in some inequality of access. It is possible that not all staff received an email invitation during the fieldwork period.
- Some survey respondents were from the same centre. Assessment approaches varied at centre level. This may mean that the survey data is sensitive to the balance of respondents from different centres.
- Although respondents were asked to complete the survey for each subject they graded for, most chose not to, and only completed the survey for one subject, usually a GCSE, AS or A level. This may mean that those involved in grading vocational qualifications are under-represented in the survey. For this reason, the discussion of key findings does not attempt to draw out any differences in perspectives between those involved in grading academic qualifications and vocational qualifications during the CDG process.
- Thirty interviews were conducted involving a range of centre staff from various setting types across Wales. However, their views cannot be taken to be representative of those of all centre staff across Wales. Interviewees completed a "yes/no" question at the end of the survey to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in an interview. The interview sample therefore only includes those who are willing to discuss their experiences, and not those who may be more reticent.
- The opinions and perceptions reflected in this report only reflect those of the centre staff who participated in the survey and depth interviews. ORS has not fully verified their factual accuracy, so they may include misperceptions. As most staff were not directly involved in the process of determining the policy, many participants will not have had a full appreciation of all aspects of relevant policy or the challenges of introducing a centre determined grading approach in the circumstances.

2.3.5. About the report

The report outlines the key findings from the survey and the depth interviews. In each section, the survey data is presented in a chart or a table, with a short narrative explanation of the data underneath each one. Key themes and quotes from the interviews are then outlined and discussed. The percentages in the charts may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

3. Main findings

3.1. Gathering assessment evidence

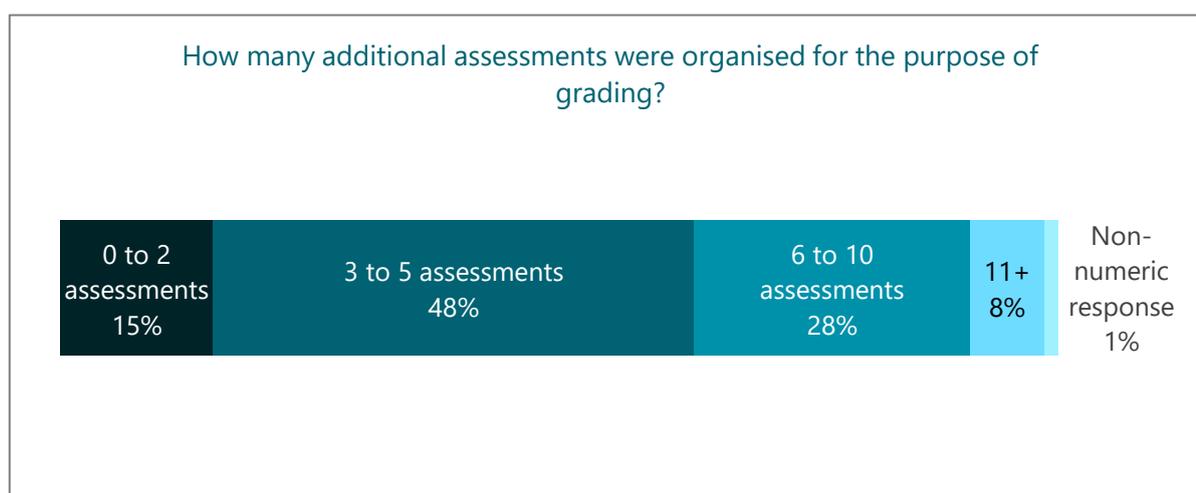
3.1.1. Use of assessments and evidence

To make grading assessments, teachers needed to gather evidence to support their decisions. Accordingly, survey respondents and interviewees were asked a variety of questions about the amount and type of evidence they used to make grading decisions for specific qualifications.

3.1.1.1. How many additional assessments were organised for grading?

Survey respondents were firstly asked how many assessments were organised for the purpose of making grading judgements about specific qualifications, in addition to the assessments which were already planned.

Figure 1: Number of additional assessments organised for the purpose of grading



Base = 373 respondents

Most respondents (76%) gave an answer between three and ten. Almost all of those taking part in the survey (95%) stated that they used all the assessments they had set as evidence for their grading judgements. Two in five (40%) also used evidence from other assessments that had not originally been intended to inform grading judgements. When interpreting these figures, it should be borne in mind that the assessments used may have varied substantially in length.

3.1.1.2. Did centres use the same or different assessments for all learners?

The vast majority of survey respondents (93%) selected the same assessments for all learners with only 7% of respondents saying they selected different assessments for different learners.

This pattern was reflected in the depth interviews, where interviewees were asked to discuss why they had used the same or different assessments for all learners. The most common reason given

for using the same assessments for all learners was to ensure fairness and consistency. Some added that this approach would help prepare learners for further learning.

"Just to have that level of consistency – that would have been the expectation, had they gone to external examination, so we wanted to keep their experience of GCSE and A level as realistic as possible [for] when they got... to A level... or to university."

Head of Department

Others added that they selected the same assessments for all learners because they wanted to minimise the case for appeals, as well as ensure fairness and consistency.

Some interviewees said that they used the same assessments for all learners because the awarding body had stated that they required it. This reflected a common theme throughout the interviews, whereby centres were sometimes reluctant to deviate from awarding bodies' guidance through concerns about external quality assurance.

"Because the exam board asks for the same assessments for all learners, why am I going to rethink it? The exam board wants this. I'm going to do what the exam board wants."

Head of Department

This may reflect a misunderstanding; although WJEC provided guidance on how centres should implement a fair grading process, the guidance did not state that all learners must complete the same assessment.

One interviewee stated that although the awarding body had suggested that centres could use their own judgement when selecting assessments, they were afraid to do so in case of any comeback.

"It was our fear of not wanting to deviate from the script, but the script that came from them. Their guidance was, 'You can do what works at your school'. No one believes that in schools. When you're taught that from an authority, like an examination board, you don't believe it, because you're afraid to go off-piste in case you're caught."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Another interviewee said that they used the same assessments for all learners because they did not want to overload staff with the amount of evidence that they would need for grading.

"We didn't want to overload staff... Most people didn't produce more than nine or ten pieces of evidence for those grades... It had to be spread out over a variety of pieces."

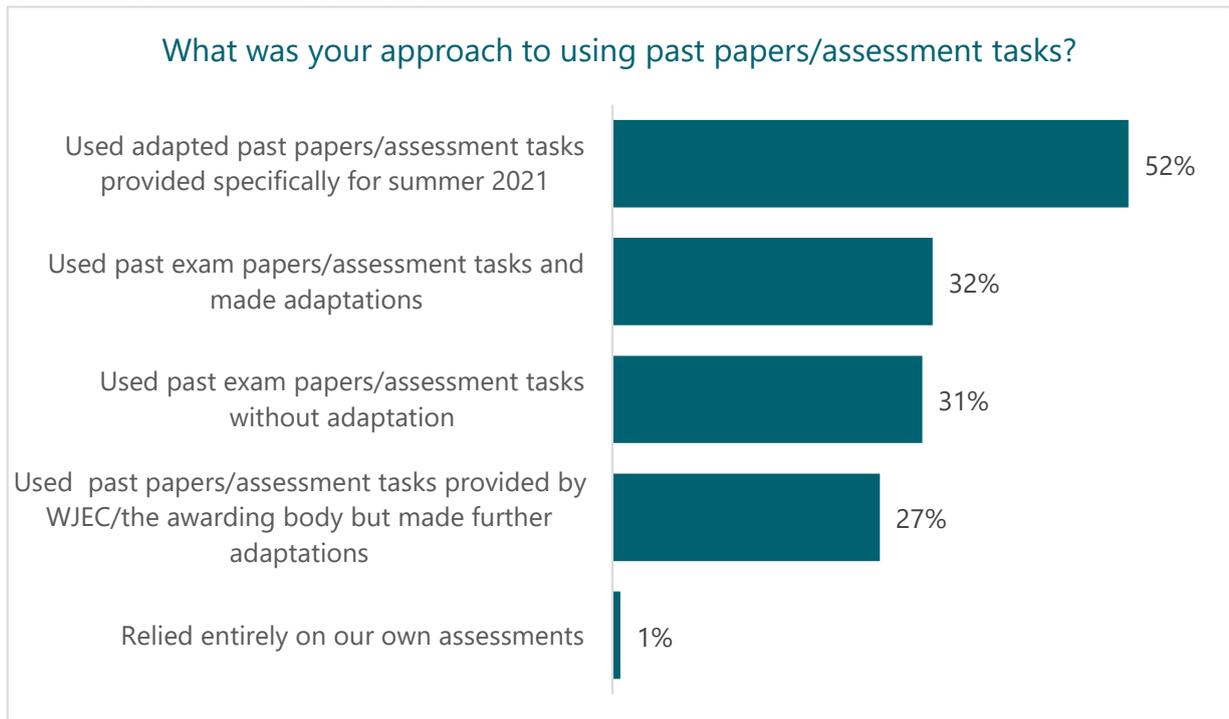
Head of Department

A few interviewees also clarified that whilst they used the same assessments in general, they had to make alternative provisions for some learners. This generally meant that teachers would provide them with the same assessments but consider different forms of evidence in certain circumstances, such as when a learner had missed an assessment or a significant amount of time in school due to COVID-19.

3.1.1.3. How did centres use past papers or assessment tasks?

The online survey asked respondents about their approach to using past papers and assessment tasks.

Figure 2: Approach to using past papers/assessment tasks



Base = 376 respondents

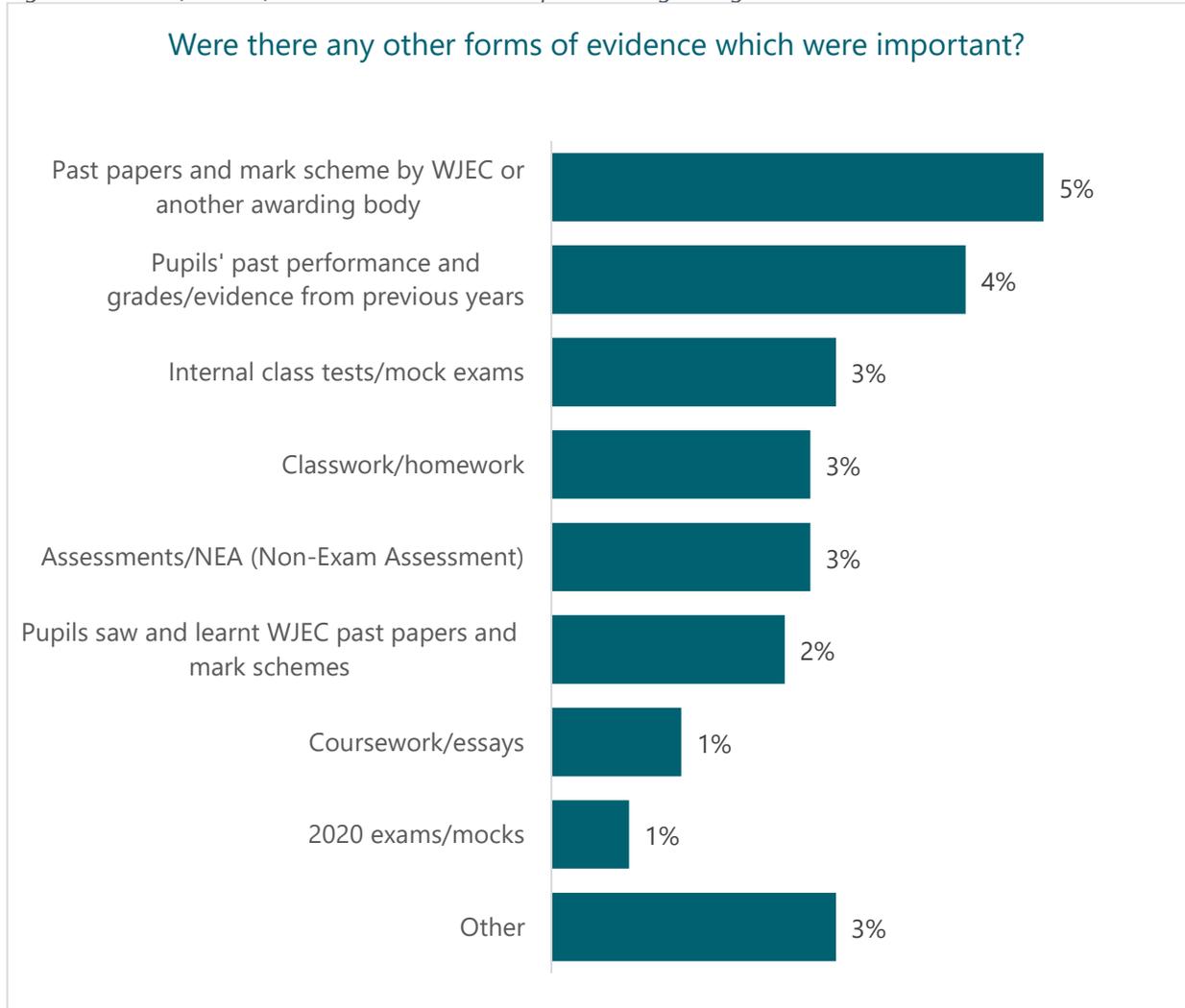
Over half of respondents stated that they had used the adapted past papers or assessment tasks provided by WJEC/the awarding body to make grading decisions for summer 2021.

Just under a third (32%) of respondents reported using exam papers or assessments from previous years and making their own adaptations to them, whilst a similar proportion (31%) used papers without adaptations. Around a quarter (27%) had used the assessment tasks provided by the awarding bodies after further adapting them for their own learners.

3.1.1.4. Did centres use any other forms of evidence for grading?

Survey respondents were asked if there were any other forms of evidence which were important in their grading decisions.

Figure 3: Other forms of evidence which were important in grading decisions



Base = 395 respondents

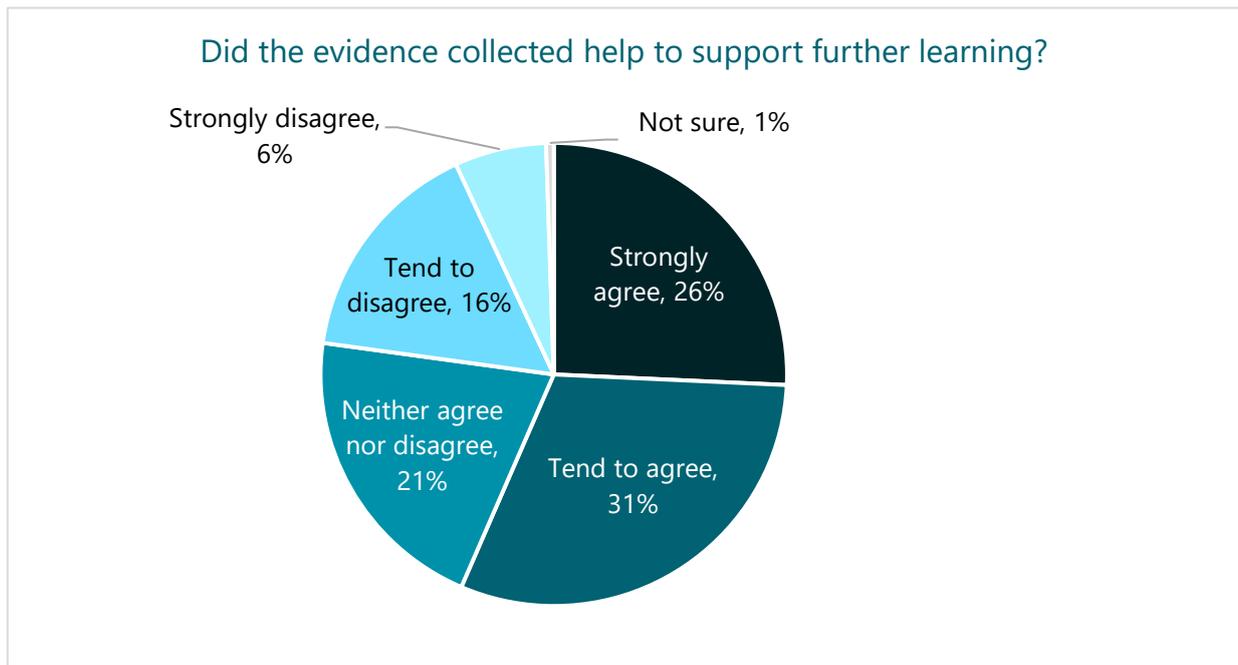
Over half (55%) did not mention another form of evidence. This suggests that they did not consider any additional evidence in making their decision.

Of those who mentioned that they used other forms of evidence, the most common responses were 'past papers and mark schemes by WJEC or another awarding body' (5%) and 'pupils' past performance and grades/performance tracking/evidence from previous years' (4%).

3.1.1.5. How far did the evidence collected support further learning?

A follow-up question was asked of survey respondents regarding the extent to which the evidence collected to support grading judgements also helped to support learning.

Figure 4: Did the evidence collected to support grading also support further learning?



Base = 377 respondents

Over half (57%) strongly agreed or tended to agree that this evidence helped to support further learning, whilst less than a quarter (22%) disagreed with this.

3.1.1.6. How did centres select evidence for grading?

Interviewees were asked how they selected their evidence for grading. Most said that they selected their evidence based on what they felt was most likely to be accepted by awarding bodies. Consequently, outside of non-examination assessment (NEA), they tended to state that they used the adapted past papers that the awarding bodies had provided as the main, or sole, evidence for grading.

"WJEC told me what they wanted to be submitted, so that's what I took. I did exactly what they told me they wanted to be assessed: one performance, one composition, and one exam paper."

Head of Department

Again, many interviewees stressed their perception of the importance of adhering to awarding bodies' guidance through concerns expressed about the external quality assurance process.

Several interviewees said that senior leaders and heads of department led decisions around selecting evidence for grading.

"The department leaders, in their departments, looked at the assessment framework from WJEC and then from there they put together assessments that they felt matched the guidance and structure that was required by them."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

The exact selection and weighting of these assessments and how/when they were carried out during the year varied between centres. One interviewee, for example, said that teachers picked each learner's best three grades from all their assessments over the year and awarded them the

average grade between the three. Another said that their centre weighted assessments more heavily as the year went on (e.g., using assessments worth 5% or 10% early in the year, and an assessment worth 50% at the end of the year).

"We did a handful of online assessments during the lockdown from January to April and we had them sat very rigorously... all very strictly under timed examination conditions. And then the summer adapted papers were used... So, we would have had all of those grades on a spreadsheet for every pupil and the centre policy was to choose the best three."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

A few interviewees said that the disruptions to learning caused by the pandemic had prevented them from delivering parts of the syllabus in class. When deciding on which assessments to use, they tried to take account of grade boundaries in previous past papers to choose those they felt were neither too easy nor too demanding for their learners, given the circumstances.

"We looked at past papers... ones that had not very low grade boundaries, but also not very harsh ones ... ones that were fair overall... to give them the best opportunity."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Another interviewee focused on the syllabus when selecting evidence for learners' grades. This individual said that they held numerous assessments over a period, with each one being based on a different part of the syllabus.

"We decided as a school to have classroom-based assessments, shorter assessments compared with the norm... Rather than setting assessments around a certain paper, they split several papers into topic areas..."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One individual said that the evidence used for each learner's grade was based on what they had shown themselves to be capable of over the previous three years.

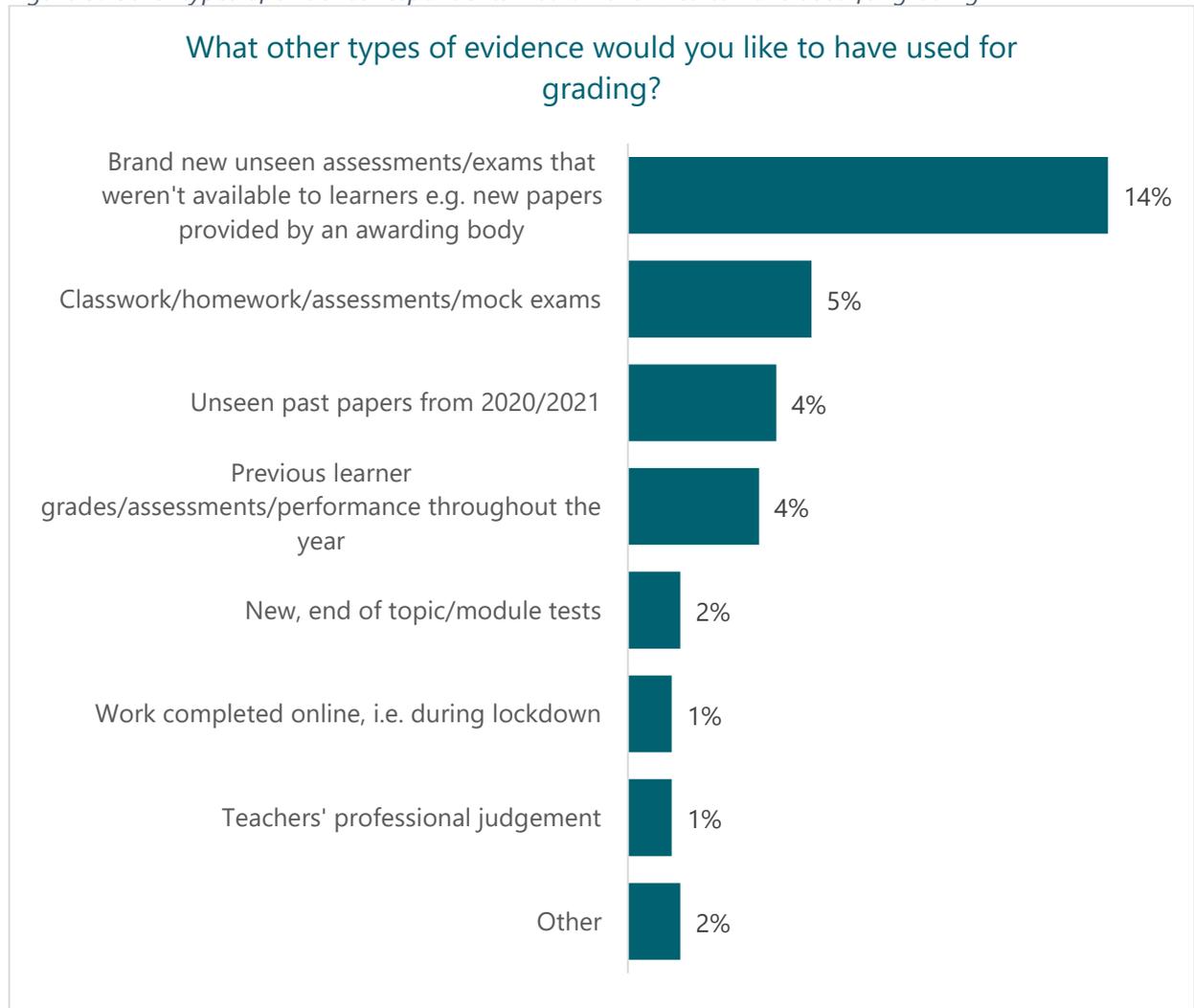
"...the pieces of evidence that best reflected students' performance and ability over the three years. Because there's a tracking procedure, we know what our students are capable of achieving quite rigorously..."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.1.7. Did centres have enough flexibility when selecting evidence?

Survey respondents were asked if there was any type of evidence that they would have liked to have used but were not able to. More than six in ten (63%) said that there was not, but three in ten (31%) said that there was additional evidence that they would have liked to have used.

Figure 5: Other types of evidence respondents would have liked to have used for grading



Base = 395 respondents

The most frequently mentioned evidence that respondents would have liked to access was brand new, unseen assessments/exams that were not available to learners e.g., new papers provided by an awarding body. This was mentioned by 14% of respondents.

Around 5% mentioned other assessments or mock exams. The next three codes captured responses from around 5% of participants.

The depth interviews also explored whether there had been enough flexibility to select the pieces of evidence that they used to determine grades.

Most of those who felt they had enough flexibility were wholly positive about the process of selecting evidence, without any complaints. They said that that they had enough time to select evidence from a wide range of sources whilst remaining within the awarding body's guidelines.

"Absolutely. We could pretty much choose what we wanted. I was really happy with that because I was concerned we were just going to get a list of what we needed to get done and if we hadn't done it we'd need to find time to do it. And in a year where there's no time, it would have been difficult."

Head of Department

Some interviewees who felt they had enough flexibility said that regardless of the flexibility offered to them, they preferred to keep their processes consistent and close to the guidance to ensure consistency and fairness for learners.

"To be honest, being given guidelines - this is what we want. For me, it was, 'Yes: I can provide that', and if everybody follows what the exam board says they want, then every child is going to be treated in exactly the same way."

Head of Department

A few interviewees said that while they were glad to have flexibility when selecting pieces of evidence, they expressed concerns about the assessments which were provided by WJEC. Reflecting a recurring theme throughout this report, these interviewees said that in their opinion, too few papers were available. Interviewees also felt that, because the papers were based on past exams that had previously been published, this meant that some learners reviewed the material in advance, which interviewees felt gave them an unfair advantage.

"Obviously, the problem we found as we went through the process was with some of the qualifications where there were limited assessment materials... Once [the learners] spotted the year of the paper, it impacted on their performance."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Despite these concerns, these interviewees were still generally positive about the flexibility to select evidence for grading.

Of those who said there was not enough flexibility because too few past papers were made available to them, some also felt that their centre had further restricted their flexibility.

"It was very much put on us that you could only use these papers. Yes, you could change numbers, but if you did, you'd have to write a long report... That might have been a school interpretation as opposed to what QW [Qualifications Wales] or WJEC were saying. We went on an INSET and we came away being told you need to pick a year and select the questions, and no mix and match."

Head of Department

The remaining interviewees said that whilst the awarding body allowed some flexibility in theory, they did not feel that they could use it due to concerns about external quality assurance, as already noted. Another interviewee said that they did not have the time to use the flexibility available to them because the decision to use teacher assessments had come so late.

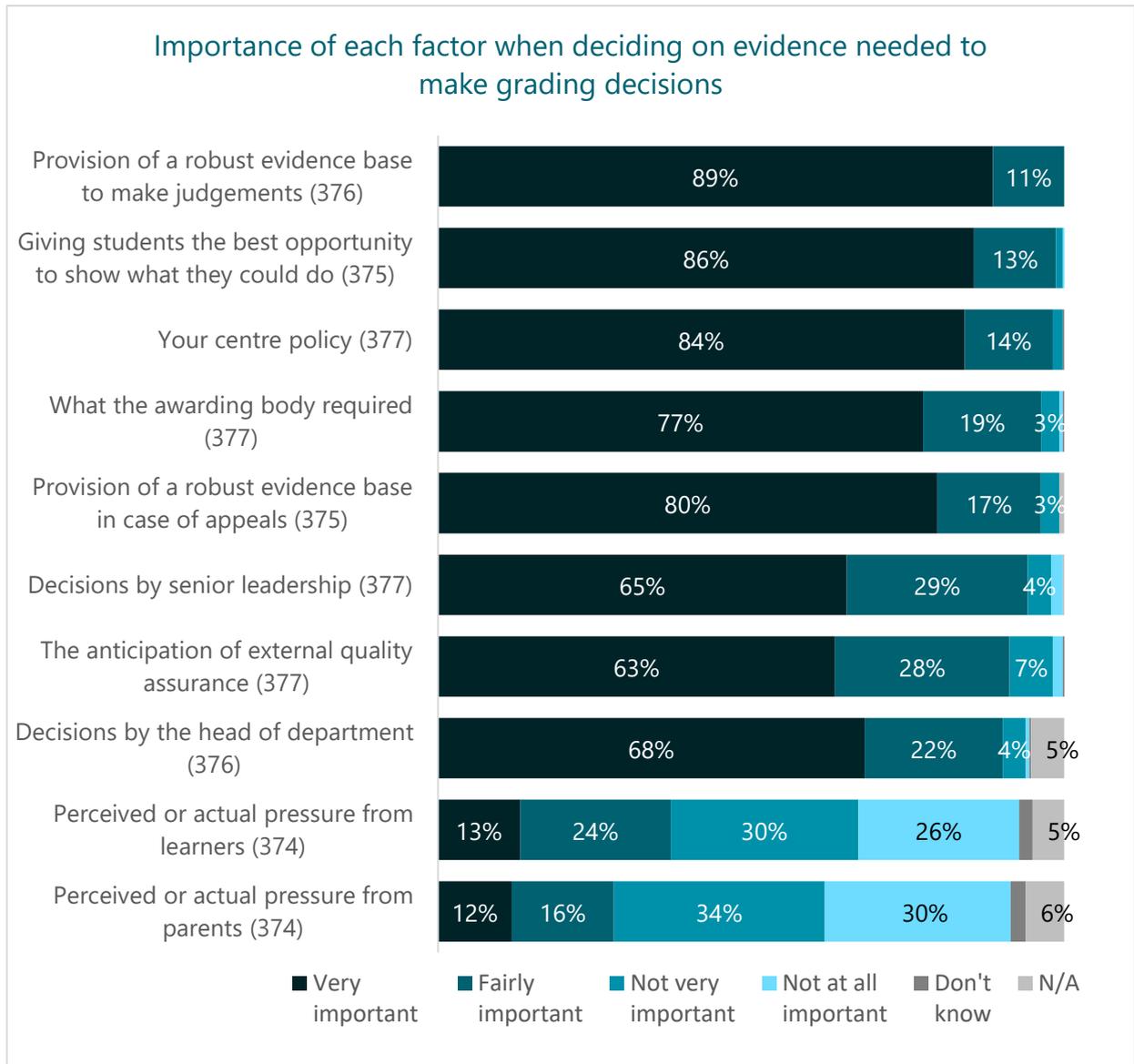
"Because it was told pretty late about what was going to happen... the college then had to make the decision about what sort of work they wanted us to set that would be rigorous enough and meet the academic expectations... pressure to turn that around in such a short time was hard."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.2. Influences on decisions around how much evidence to use

Respondents were asked to rate how important they considered a series of factors to be when they were deciding on the amount of evidence required to make grading decisions for their learners.

Figure 6: Importance of each factor when deciding the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions



Base = All respondents (see brackets for each question)

The factor which had the highest percentage of “very important” ratings from those involved in the process was ‘provision of a robust evidence base to make judgements’, closely followed by ‘giving learners the best opportunity to show what they could do’. The third-highest percentage of “very important” ratings was ‘centre policy’, suggesting that respondents saw this as something they needed to follow as part of the evidence gathering process.

Most other factors were rated as very or fairly important by 90% or more of respondents apart from ‘perceived or actual pressure from learners’ and ‘perceived or actual pressure from parents’, which were both rated as not important (not very or not at all) by a higher proportion of respondents than all the other factors (56% and 64% respectively).

Interviewees were asked to explain the reasons behind their survey responses. Their feedback on each factor is summarised in the following sub-sections.

3.1.2.1. Provision of a robust evidence base to make judgements

Interviewees who said that provision of a robust evidence base was important when deciding on the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions emphasised the need to combine a variety of forms of evidence from different sources to support fair and transparent grading decisions. An interviewee who said that provision of a robust evidence base to make judgements was important described how they double-marked assessments to increase fairness and reduce bias when developing the evidence base, linking this to the training materials and assessment frameworks developed by WJEC, and the centre's policy, which were all cascaded to staff ahead of grading.

"That comes down to the [centre] policy that was put down before we even started. We made sure that we did sufficient assessments to cover everything. We made sure that if there were several teachers marking on a certain course then we did cross marking. If that cross marking didn't tie in, if it was beyond a certain boundary, we cross marked even more... We are very aware of unconscious bias that we'd been told to look out for. We'd seen all the training videos for that from WJEC. We'd signed to say we'd seen them, so we were very careful with that."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Reflecting points made elsewhere, other interviewees who felt that this factor was important stressed the need to ensure that the evidence used for grading was the learner's own work and had not been influenced by parents or materials obtained online (including the mark schemes which were temporarily available on WJEC's website). Accordingly, some interviewees said that they used evidence obtained in class as far as possible to maintain objectivity.

Several others emphasised the importance of developing a robust evidence base in case grading decisions were queried or challenged by senior leaders, awarding bodies, learners, or parents. Having a robust evidence base to draw on would provide clear justification for the grades awarded, whilst also helping to make the grading process fairer, more holistic, and more transparent, it was said.

"...just to make sure if there were any challenges. It wasn't to challenge the mark because they didn't like it, it's because we had very clear evidence that we could [use] to say this is how you performed, this is the mark that you were awarded, this is how all of this has been added up. We have taken into consideration any sickness, any absence."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

3.1.2.2. Giving learners the best chance to show what they could do

Most interviewees who reflected on the factor of giving learners the best chance to show what they could do discussed the impact of COVID-19 on learners' education, wellbeing, and future achievement. They stressed the need for the assessment process to be fair to ensure that the grades awarded reflected learners' competence before the pandemic, their improvement since then, and what they would have achieved, had their education not been interrupted.

Some interviewees noted that, during the pandemic, some learners had been better supported to study at home than others. For example, not all had reliable internet, access to a computer, or supportive families. Those whose home environments were less conducive to learning were at a disadvantage relative to those who had supportive home environments, it was said. This, in tandem with learner and staff absences, and the wider detrimental impact of the pandemic,

influenced the content and structure of the assessments set by some centre staff. Interviewees said that they incorporated questions covering a range of levels to ensure that they were appropriate for learners of all abilities to show what they could do.

"For our top end learners, we noticed that... they'd done their own learning, or their parents were supportive but for our weaker learners, that was a real big gap and that gap got bigger as we went into Year 11.... Going back to a test that was fit for all learners, we needed to include those foundation level questions... because a lot of our students fell in that criteria [sic] due to the lockdown."

Head of Department

Others commented on the structure of the assessments undertaken by learners. Several said that assessments were split up into smaller chunks which were more accessible for learners in general, increasing fairness.

"We made sure we gave sufficient assessments. It wasn't just one big assessment. We made it probably slightly easier than in a normal exam year because the assessments were shorter, but at the same time we did more assessments, so we did cover every learning outcome... they'd had such a hard time over the last year, and we were trying to make it as fair as possible for them."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

The topics selected by centre staff were also tailored to learners' abilities and preferences, as well as selected to reflect the material which had been covered in class, interviewees noted.

"Because we'd covered everything, we could pick any exam we wanted. We didn't have to remove additional material. There were some instances where we had to remove questions... We wanted to include questions which covered a broad spectrum of the course, so it was very important to us that we gave pupils who were stronger [in one area of a subject] an opportunity to demonstrate themselves as well as in [another area]. So, it was important that we included assessments that covered everything."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Learners were feeling anxious due to last-minute changes to the assessment arrangements, and due to the wider impact of the pandemic on their learning and their lives in general, some interviewees said. Adopting a clear, structured approach to assessment and being clear about the amount and types of evidence that would be used for grading made learners feel more confident, according to interviewees. This, in turn, helped to ensure that they could achieve to the best of their ability, under the circumstances, it was said.

"We made a decision as a school that if something was going to be high-stakes for the students, we would inform them of that because we found the wellbeing of the students was really impacted by not knowing... you'd walk into a class and the children were too scared to speak in exam classes because they didn't know if you were going to judge what they were going to say and use it against them... I'm not sure that when you're writing policies in an office you perhaps understand how that feels in a classroom. So, we had to be fair, and we had to get it right."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.2.3. Centre policy

Adhering to the centre policy and guidance from awarding bodies helped to ensure that centres adopted a structured, consistent, and rigorous approach to grading, some interviewees noted. This approach was also said to be achieved through clear leadership and a shared understanding of the process between centre staff.

"I think because the board's requirement and the centre policy... because that was the framework within we knew we would operate. There was a risk of it being a really inconsistent process within the centre, never mind between centres unless there was a real clarity of leadership and a clarity of understanding how we do certain things and how we go about those things."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Communicating the centre policy clearly to learners and their parents so that they understood the approach to grading was also considered important.

"As a centre, we were very clear on the evidence we were going to use. Something that's very important to our centre is our relationship with the community. So, we put out very early a big list of subjects for the school and the evidence that would be taken for those subjects... I didn't want to move from that centre policy because we put that out into the community. Parents needed to know exactly what students should be revising for which exams."

Head of Department

Several interviewees said that the centre policy was important when deciding on the amount of evidence they gathered to make grading decisions for their learners because it helped to minimise the number of appeals made.

"That policy was my insurance policy, and so if I did things by the book in that perspective, then it meant that there was no comeback whatsoever from teachers or parents or pupils.... my job, as well as giving them their education and their grades, was to make sure there were as few appeals as possible. So... I checked the policy, then checked with my Head of Department."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Some interviewees reflected on the content of their centre policies. These policies were said to include:

- Standardisation
- Moderation (including specific approaches to the work of learners with protected characteristics)
- Conditions for assessments
- Which and how many pieces of evidence would be used for grading
- The appeals process.

3.1.2.4. What the awarding body required

Some interviewees who felt that what the awarding body required was important when deciding on the amount of evidence used to make grading decisions, emphasised the importance of using the awarding body's guidance to ensure consistency in the amount and type of guidance given to learners, and to ensure that they implemented a rigorous approach to grading.

Several interviewees highlighted the need to keep up to date with the multiple pieces of guidance produced by WJEC. This was seen to be particularly important in the event of external verification or quality assurance.

"We kept up-to-date with everything that was coming in from WJEC... If anything would be sampled, we would have everything ready. We followed all of the guidelines to the letter just in case that external verification was to come through."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Several interviewees said that they had based their assessment plans directly on information provided by WJEC and had incorporated those into their centre policies.

"Yes, they were the assessment plans that were given to us through WJEC... But obviously those assessment plans, we had to stick to. We'd written a centre policy that said we would adhere to the assessment plans and WJEC... said we had to follow those assessment plans. So, we were very clear, and all our department leaders were very clear, as if something's in that assessment plan, we had to have enough evidence to match what they wanted within that."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Whilst emphasising the importance of adhering to the guidance provided by WJEC, a few interviewees commented that their guidance on grading could have been clearer. This point is explored in more detail in the "training and guidance" sub-section of this report.

"Getting to the bottom of what the exam board wanted was quite a difficult job but obviously it's very important because these students need to progress and to go on to A levels or university and we want them to be prepared in the best way possible. So, it was trying to find that balance between what the exam board want us to do and how can we prepare our learners for their next steps."

Head of Department

3.1.2.5. Provision of a robust evidence base in case of appeals

Interviewees, who felt that the provision of a robust evidence base in case of appeals was key when deciding on the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions, stressed the importance of following rigorous internal processes when making grading decisions. Using the agreed amount and forms of evidence, and recording results consistently were said to be central to ensuring the robustness of the evidence base.

"Once we'd gone through that process internally and done the moderation, that fed into consistency across the centre. I delivered the INSET training on that in terms of what I wanted staff to put in. So we had a consistent approach... Like with the exams and the tests and evidence, we were using the recommended stuff by the WJEC, trying to make it as friendly and consistent as possible, but also, should there be any external verification needed, it's there."

Head of Department

Interviewees also emphasised the low numbers of learners who had appealed. They largely attributed this to the clarity and rigour of their centre's assessment processes.

"When it came to appeals... we were well able to substantiate the reasons behind that. When we did our centre review of the appeal requests, we rejected all of our requests for a review of the grade. [All] that went to appeal with exam boards... were rejected as well so that has substantiated exactly what we were trying to do."

Exams Officer / Manager

Providing a robust evidence base was also key to ensuring that learners got the grades they deserved, according to several interviewees.

"I didn't want anyone, any parent, to come back and say, 'actually no, that's not fair'. And I wanted to be able to say to anyone that came back, 'this is what we've been asked to do, this is what the children have done, this is how I've made my grade, this has been discussed with the student, this has been discussed with other members of staff', so it was step by step by step."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Keeping up with the changing guidance from awarding bodies was challenging when seeking to ensure that the evidence base was as robust as possible, some felt.

"So, one minute it was going to be this way, then it was going to be another way. There was always going to be that potential for appeals, and that's why we had to make sure the processes worked spot on. That's what made it so stressful living it, because the information was coming at us all the time. You'd have an update and sometimes you didn't always know there had been an update... We're managing lots of other things and it was impossible at times to keep up with it, but you have to keep up with it because of that possibility of an appeal."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.2.6. Decisions by senior leadership

Interviewees, who felt that decisions by senior leadership were important when deciding on the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions, tended to emphasise the strength and clarity of senior staff's leadership and communication throughout the grading process. This was said to be key to ensuring a fair and rigorous grading process.

"Our management team... told us at the beginning how it would work so that then allowed each subject to create the assessment material that was appropriate for that type of assessment, and the weighting it was going to have."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Senior leaders were said to have played an important role in cross-moderation, checking colleagues' work to ensure consistency in marking.

"When [senior leaders] were overseeing the grading process, the department leaders would put their grades forward, and then we would have a look at them. We would question where we felt there were anomalies or where we felt some things weren't aligning with what we would expect."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One interviewee felt that senior leaders had *"gone overboard"* when deciding on the amount of evidence used to make grading decisions. Through seeking to implement a grading process that was as fair and as rigorous as possible, the centre had worked with another centre. This had led the interviewee's centre to use adapted assessment materials and to use more pieces of evidence than was strictly necessary, whereas the interviewee felt that in hindsight, an alternative approach would have been more manageable for staff and may have better enabled the centre's learners to show what they could do.

"We wrote our policy... and guided what we were asking for from another school... They were so intense; we went to that degree which was just too much... The middle leaders were exceptionally unhappy with the workload, because we used the adapted assessment materials... We wanted to go straight down the path of if someone came in and investigated us, something that could be scrutinised the least and that was using those papers."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.2.7. The anticipation of external quality assurance

Interviewees said that the anticipation of external quality assurance was important when deciding on the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions to ensure that learners received the grades they deserved via a fair, transparent and accountable process.

"As professionals we have to be accountable to the grades that we gave. I would have been happy for the Welsh Joint³ to have come in, to have seen our evidence and looked at our standardisation process [and] look at our policy plan because they would then be able to verify that the grades we'd given were fair and reliable and equitable... The learners come first."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

A few interviewees mentioned that they worked with other centres to cross-moderate for certain qualifications which were taught by only one member of staff to provide additional reassurance, should external quality assurance be required. This provided an extra layer of scrutiny.

As already mentioned, the anticipation of quality assurance was extremely stressful for some interviewees. This was worsened by the sheer volume of information circulated by awarding bodies, they said.

Rumours that some other centres were taking a less rigorous approach to grading added to the stress that centres were already under, according to a few interviewees.

"...we were very fair, very robust and stringent... we don't know if that was reflected in other centres... We were hearing about other centres that had 15% improvements in the results that they were getting, and we were, 'how can that possibly be?' so, it got to a point where we were wondering, have we done our students a disservice by being so thorough with them and so close to what the truth was with the evidence base in front of us? That is something we were really, really torn with in the end."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

3.1.2.8. Decisions by the Head of Department

Interviewees' views on the importance of decisions by the Head of Department when determining the amount of evidence to use for grading decisions largely reflected those shared in relation to the importance of decisions by senior leaders.

Interviewees reflected on Heads of Department's leadership of, and communication about, the grading process to ensure that centre staff had a shared understanding of its requirements and were able to communicate this to learners and parents to ensure clarity and minimise appeals.

³ "Welsh Joint" refers to the WJEC, which was formerly known as the Welsh Joint Education Committee.

Interviewees stressed the need for Heads of Department to have full oversight of assessment practice throughout their department to ensure consistency and fairness for learners. This included ensuring that learners completed the same assessments at the same times and/or under the same conditions.

"What we didn't want to happen was certain pupils sitting assessments at certain points in the school week and then some other pupils sit the same assessment later on that week. So, we had to try and make sure those pupils were sitting the assessments in the same slots. In terms of the consistent approach, the staff really bought into it."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

The importance of close collaboration between Heads of Department, senior leaders, and staff was also noted by interviewees in order to ensure a consistent and rigorous approach to grading.

"As Head of Department, I'm seeing it from the teachers' point of view and they know their students well and therefore when it came to the grading they would know what would contribute to the grading... [you need to] have respect for your senior management team and you need to work well with them and have the same vision, so it was important that we both knew how the grading would take place."

Head of Department

3.1.2.9. Perceived or actual pressure from learners

Reflecting the survey data, most interviewees said that perceived and actual pressure from learners was less important than other factors when deciding on the amount of evidence needed to make grading decisions.

Most interviewees who said that this factor was less important stressed that, while it was important to acknowledge learners' concerns, it would not have been fair or appropriate to let them influence the grading process unduly. Some interviewees stated that they resisted any pressure from learners (and parents) because they lacked the detailed insight into the grading process that centre staff had.

"Because the students and the parents don't have the specification in front of them, they do not know exactly what the course entails under normal circumstances, let alone what adjustments had been made by the exam board, so they could not make an informed decision as to what we were expecting the children to do."

Head of Department

Reflecting responses made in relation to other questions, some interviewees highlighted the importance of clear communication with learners (and parents) about the grading process to minimise uncertainty and appeals.

Interviewees who felt that perceived or actual pressure from learners was important tended to state that the responsibility to ensure that learners got the grades they deserved via a fair and transparent process weighed heavily on them.

"I wanted them to do well, and these eyes have sat and looked at me for five years of my life and their life... They've been thrown into this horrific situation that's out of their control completely... At least with exams we know what's going on, at least with exams we know the process... My pupils, bless them, although they knew what they wanted, there was no 'I need a C, I need this, need that'. I kind of said to them, 'Look, this is the situation. I can't tell you at all."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.1.2.10. Perceived or actual pressure from parents

As with 'perceived or actual pressure from learners', perceived or actual pressure from parents was again seen by most interviewees to be less important than the other factors explored in this question when deciding on the amount of evidence used to make grading decisions.

Several interviewees noted that they had more pressure from parents than from learners during the grading process. This was especially said to be the case from interviewees who taught at independent schools.

One interviewee, who taught at an independent school and had reported receiving greater parental pressure noted that their centre leaders emphasised that they were not to be *"intimidated"* by parents. Providing parents with clear communication about the grading process had helped to alleviate pressure from parents, and ultimately, minimise appeals, it was said.

"Because we are a private school, there is a certain element of parents who think that that justifies more pressure... them maybe being entitled to put more pressure on the grading process... We explained the [process] to the parents, so we mostly got the parents on side with what we were doing and the same with the pupils by saying you really do have to work for these tests that we are going to run in March and April."

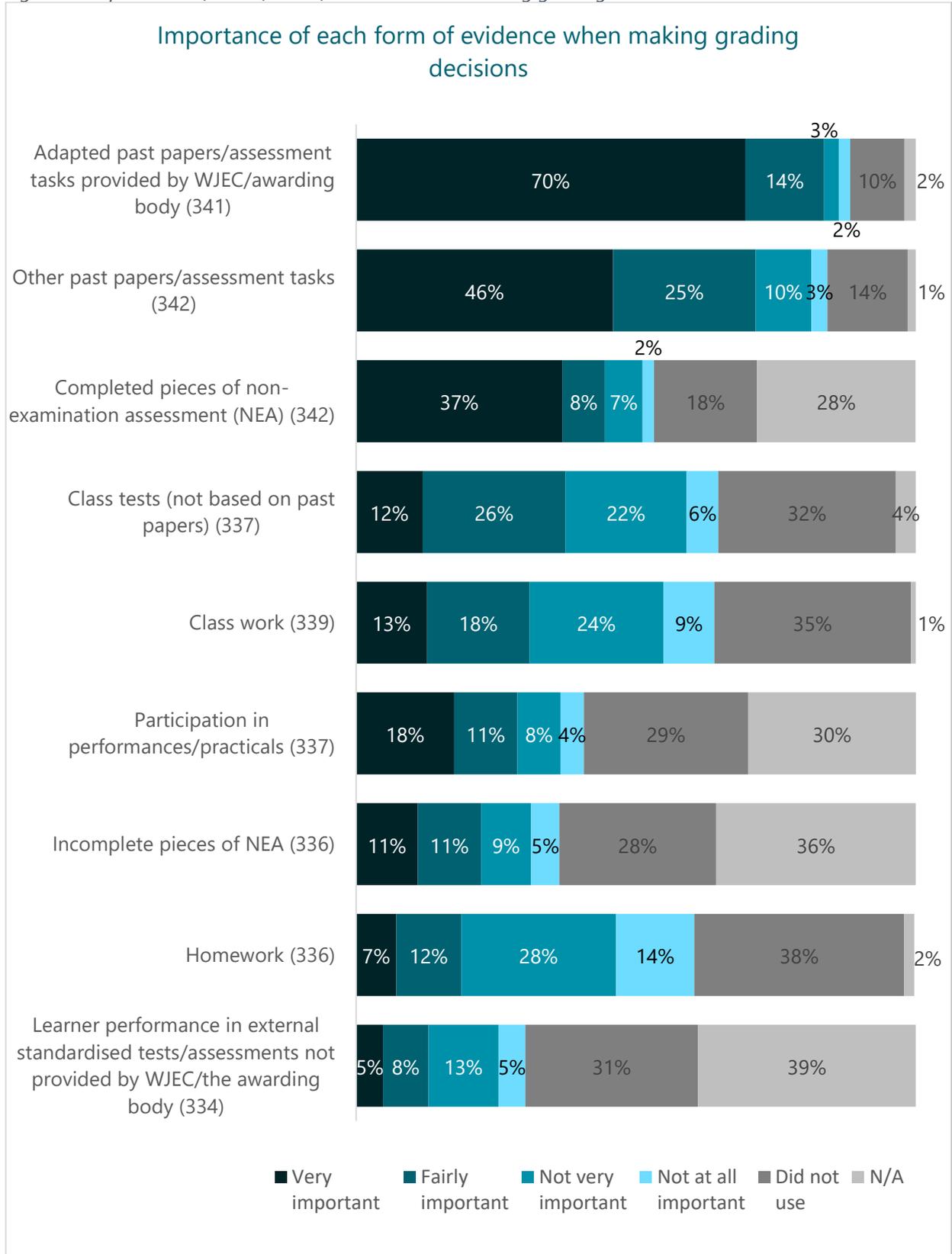
Exams Officer / Manager

Implementing a robust process and clear information also helped to minimise pressure and appeals from parents, according to some interviewees, as mentioned elsewhere.

3.1.3. Importance of each form of evidence

Survey respondents were asked about the importance of different forms of evidence when making grading decisions.

Figure 7: Importance of each form of evidence when making grading decisions



Base = All respondents (see brackets for each question)

The adapted past papers/assessment tasks provided by WJEC/awarding body were seen to be very important by seven in ten of those taking part in the survey.

Interviewees were asked to explain the reasons behind their survey responses. Their feedback on each factor is summarised as follows.

3.1.3.1. Adapted past papers or assessment tasks provided by WJEC or the awarding body

Reflecting the survey data, most interviewees said that using adapted past papers or assessment tasks provided by WJEC or the awarding body was important when making grading decisions. Some felt that these materials enhanced the rigour and robustness of the grading process because they had been *“tried and tested”* by WJEC and/or used to assess learners already. These materials also left little scope for parents or learners to question the grades awarded because they had been derived from awarding bodies, it was said, reflecting comments already made.

A few interviewees said that they had created their own assessment tasks for their learners. In some cases, this was for newly reformed GCSEs such as Health and Social Care, and Childcare, which did not yet have any past papers. In other cases, interviewees stated that they adapted questions from past papers or assessment tasks from WJEC or the awarding body to ensure that they incorporated material that had been covered in class.

Several interviewees noted that, although they used adapted past papers or assessment tasks provided by WJEC or the awarding body because they had been advised to do so, they felt that this approach was unfair because these materials had been publicly available, and many learners had simply memorised the questions and mark schemes. This reflects points made elsewhere in the report. To address this issue, these interviewees felt that the WJEC/awarding body should have made unseen papers available.

To increase fairness, one interviewee stated that they made very minor changes to the past papers provided by WJEC, as they had been told by the awarding body that not using the past papers could penalise their learners.

“I did adapt them very slightly. I changed a few [details], just to make sure they couldn’t write down a learned mark scheme... you’re really testing then something completely different. You’re testing memory work and not testing their understanding.”

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A few interviewees reflected that using the adapted past papers in exam conditions was a labour-intensive process.

“First were the assessments available on WJEC with the mark schemes. The adapted ones. Every subject used those, so we used those to get our base score. We ran them in exam conditions within classes, so phones were collected in. Everything was labour intensive: it was ridiculous.”

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

3.1.3.2. Other past papers or assessment tasks

Most of the interviewees who said that other past papers or assessment tasks were important when making grading decisions, described how they used these materials as part of a suite of information gathered for each learner to give a balanced picture of their attainment.

"We had a mock exam at Christmas. We had a piece of work that needed to be done around about February time, and then we could choose what format that took. Then we had coursework that they did over Easter, and then we had in class tests then around about the May half term, around then as well."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A few interviewees said that they regularly use past papers with learners in class to track their progress and make fair judgements when assessing them.

"The past papers and previous assessments are important because they give me an idea of where the children have been performing in terms of their written work and if for some reason they're [absent or have extenuating circumstances] and the actual paper they do in class, say they get 20% in that but all their previous assessments have been 70%/80%, then obviously that one is an anomaly, so I would use those then to say, 'Well, actually this is such an outlier, it's so far off field that this is what I'm going to look at to make that decision'. Because again, it's the fairness, isn't it?"

Head of Department

Although emphasising the value of this approach in terms of it giving a detailed view of learners' progress, a few interviewees outlined that using a variety of past papers and assessment tasks had been difficult to manage whilst many learners were at home.

"It was a little difficult. Children were in and out. There was a lot on online learning. We made loads of videos, but there was a lot of inequality in terms of some doing everything and some doing nothing. It was very difficult to work out how to make it fair for everybody."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.1.3.3. Non-examination assessment (NEA)

Some interviewees discussed the use of NEA. One interviewee explained that NEA was valuable when making grading decisions because it enabled learners to experience different elements of the qualification. This, in turn, would help to prepare them for further learning and make up for some of the learning lost during the pandemic, it was said.

"Obviously, we knew when they went to college, they were going to be behind on information in comparison to other years, but we wanted them to have had a touch across all the different components, so we made sure those adapted papers then covered a breadth."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Learners had managed to complete substantial pieces of NEA during the pandemic, according to another interviewee. They therefore noted that this form of evidence made a valuable contribution toward grading decisions.

"During lockdown, we had really good engagement and we did every lesson live... A lot of the more practical subjects like D&T [Design and Technology GCSE] managed within the restrictions to have students in the workshop every day the school was open... So, we didn't think it disadvantaged students to use NEAs because... we were confident they'd completed them. They were done with integrity; we'd followed the guidelines given. So, we felt that was a robust piece of evidence that would stand up to scrutiny from the board, but would actually stand up to challenge from parents as well."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Although they felt that NEA was important when making grading decisions, one interviewee reflected on the difficulty of conducting oral assessments with learners online as part of the NEA for a language qualification. Although the process was as rigorous as possible under the circumstances, they felt that it was more challenging for learners and centres relative to conducting oral assessments face-to-face.

"Our oral exams, we carried those out via Google Meets... that was very difficult... I suppose the students were more disadvantaged than advantaged because if you've ever had a lesson via Google Meets... the children are so inhibited when it comes to speaking in that sort of situation. They're so much more confident putting messages in the chat. But, actually speaking live I think they found it more of an ordeal than a one-on-one speaking exam situation."

Head of Department

Conversely, several interviewees said that there were instances where they did not use pieces of NEA when making grading decisions because they were incomplete and they felt that this would have allowed little insight into learners' ability.

"I don't do guess work... Yes, we know our children. but an incomplete piece of work is not a body of evidence that can actually say to me, 'This is what it is'. I don't think that would be fair to the children, for me to guess what they'd done."

Head of Department

3.1.3.4. Class tests not based on past papers

Interviewees who stated that class tests not based on past papers were important when making grading decisions said that they tended to use this approach in conjunction with other forms of evidence when making grading decisions. Most of these interviewees said that class tests helped to provide objective, reliable evidence of learners' ability.

For some GCSEs such as Music, interviewees said that some tests had to be done in class because learners lacked the facilities or equipment to do them at home. For other GCSEs such as Mathematics, interviewees explained that they made greater use of class tests that were not based on past papers, relative to other forms of evidence- with learners taking the higher tier. Conversely, they tended to use different combinations of evidence to assess learners sitting lower tiers.

"It depended on what tier they were setting. Last year, [for] a higher tier class... I made sure that our class tests which we use towards target grades which could have been used as evidence, were actually self-made questions – unseen questions, completely original material written by me or my colleague. In the intermediate class, for example, their class tests were an amalgamation of unseen questions and past paper questions."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Some interviewees noted that learners felt under less pressure when completing the class tests compared to exams and to the adapted past papers or assessment tasks provided by WJEC. Consequently, learners tended to perform better on the class tests than on the more formal assessments. Their class tests were therefore an important indicator of learners' true ability, it was said.

"End of topic tests... we find they're less stressed about... it doesn't have that exam pressure... we actually increased their grade or decreased their grade based on those end of unit tests, so if a student got an A but had actually been a C grade all year, it was maybe that they worked those past paper questions and actually having an A* wouldn't have led to them having the best experience at A level, because it wasn't a true reflection of their ability."*

Head of Department

One interviewee stated that end of year tests and substantial elements of NEA were less important than class tests not based on past papers when determining learners' grades, although emphasised the need to use a range of evidence to determine grading.

"Again, because we have lots of testing because we have lots of analysis throughout the two years of the course of study, we have a lot of evidence to base on that, but then equally the tests that we ran through March and April 2021 gave us an awful lot of other evidence as well and in line with what all the [awarding] bodies wanted. That's what we used as a prime source of evidence, not the only but the prime source, blending the other things in with less importance as we got down to the class tests."

Exams Officer / Manager

3.1.3.5. Class work

Most interviewees who reflected on the importance of class work when making grading decisions felt that it was not a completely accurate or robust reflection of the learner's own ability, and therefore was not as important as other forms of evidence. This was partly because learners often worked in groups in class.

"The classwork... [is not] always a reliable indicator of the candidate's individual performance and achievement because in class they would be working in pairs and threes and fours."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Class work was not subject to the same stringent moderation and standardisation processes as some other forms of assessment, which reduced its importance in the grading process, interviewees also noted.

"We couldn't guarantee a consistent experience. We couldn't guarantee a consistent robustness, so when that assessment was undertaken, and because with the sum of past papers, we had a very clear standardisation and moderation, we couldn't guarantee the classwork would have stood up to the scrutiny."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Conversely, one interviewee said that class work had been important when making grading decisions for learners with prolonged absences from class.

"So, the reason classwork was quite important was one student who wasn't here, they did not complete any tests. And so, for that reason, I had to include classwork in the decision-making process. I therefore felt that it was important that although people did do the tests, I also considered... classwork for the others, because again I can then say, 'Everyone was judged on the assessment and their classwork, not just this person.'"

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Another interviewee saw class work as important when making grading decisions to acknowledge learners' efforts. They also noted that class work was often indicative of learners' overall ability.

"At that point it was the involvement with the class work and generally, pre-COVID, those pupils that get higher grades are the ones that are involved with their class work and are trying hard, and you feel you should reward the effort regardless of the background. So at that point we thought class work was very important, because when you look back you can normally look back and match good class work with good grades, and therefore it gives a good indicator."

Head of Department

3.1.3.6. Participation in performances or practicals

Most interviewees stated that they did not use participation in performances or practicals when making grading decisions because it was not relevant to their subjects. However, grading decisions in subjects like Music and Drama, which had substantial performance elements, relied heavily on participation in performances or practicals.

One interviewee described how their centre had recorded music and drama performances in advance in case a further lockdown or learner absence reduced opportunities for recording.

"We invested quite heavily in audio visual equipment... knowing there wouldn't be visiting examiners... Drama and Music recorded all practicals, knowing that if we had a winter lockdown, they would teach the exam paper. That massively paid off."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.3.7. Homework

Homework was not important to most interviewees when making grading decisions. This was largely because it could not be guaranteed that learners had not been assisted with their homework by parents or carers at home, or by private tutors.

Using homework to make grading decisions was seen to be unfair by some interviewees and open to challenge from learners and parents. This was because learners may not have tried their best on it if they did not know in advance that it would count towards their overall grade.

"Because we hadn't informed the students that that is what was going to happen, and it was almost like a retrospective thing which we thought could lead to a lot of challenge... 'Had I known my homework was going to be used for this, I would have tried harder'... So, we wanted to make sure that they had that information initially, so then they could make that judgement."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Conversely, a few interviewees felt that homework was a good reflection of learners' ability and used it in combination with other assessments to form part of their overall grade.

"The extended homework was essay based, and again we used work from past papers. But the Easter assessment, we had to make a professional judgement and make it up, and make up our own mark scheme, based on the type of questions that are asked and - because the mark schemes don't vary greatly, they're looking for the same sorts of things. So, the content varies but the grading tends to be quite similar. So, we sat down as a team to come up with our own questions and criteria."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.1.3.8. Learner performance in external standardised tests or assessments not provided by WJEC or the awarding body

In line with the survey responses, nearly all interviewees said that they did not use learner performance in external standardised tests or assessments not provided by WJEC or the awarding body when making grading decisions, or that this form of evidence was not applicable to them. The one interviewee who commented on this form of evidence felt that it would not be rigorous enough to use for this purpose, and that presenting learners with an unfamiliar type of assessment would increase their anxiety.

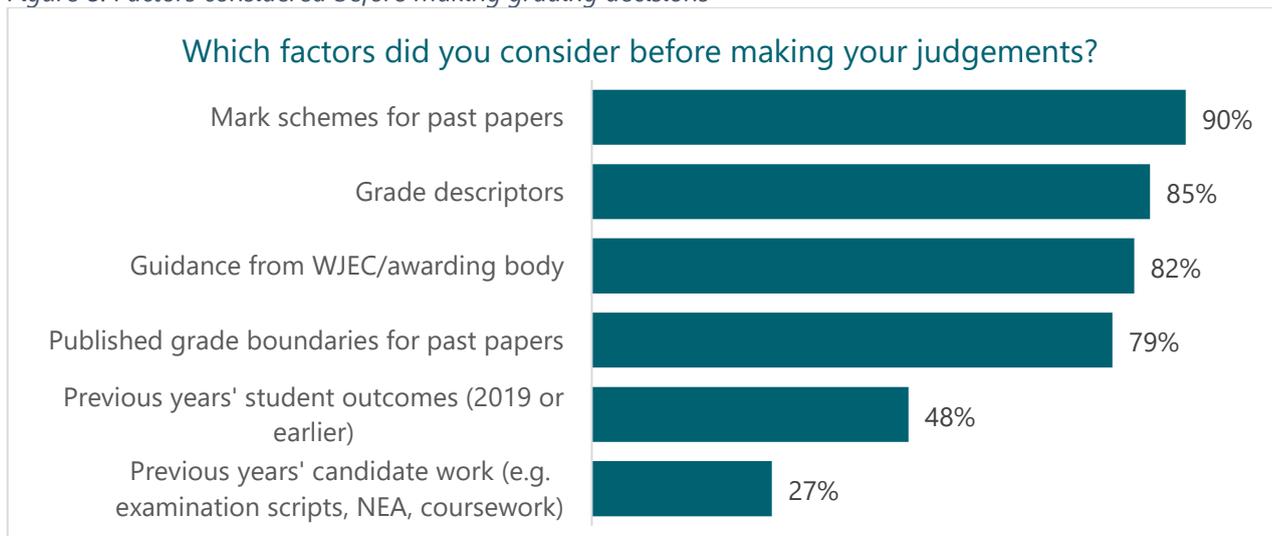
"I don't think it was authentic enough. They were destined to do a WJEC exam... WJEC provides suggested vocabulary. We follow WJEC scheme of work... If I put an [other external standardised test or assessment not provided by WJEC or the awarding body] in front of them when we'd been looking at WJEC, they'd freak out... that's another level of stress that I didn't want to provide them with. I didn't feel like it was fair in any way to give them that."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.1.4. Factors considered when making grading decisions

Respondents were asked to state which factors they considered when making grading decisions.

Figure 8: Factors considered before making grading decisions



Base = 333 respondents

As Figure 8 shows, a large majority of respondents used mark schemes for past papers, grade descriptors, guidance from WJEC/awarding body, and published grade boundaries for past papers before making their judgements. Less than half of those who responded to our survey had considered the outcomes of previous cohorts or the work from learners submitted during the previous year.

3.1.4.1. How well did grade descriptors work?

Interviewees were asked how well grade descriptors worked, and how, if at all, they could be improved. Most interviewees felt that the grade descriptors given to them by WJEC could have been improved. They were said to lack crucial detail by omitting every other grade. This created ambiguity, confusion, and tension when grading. Grade descriptors should therefore be more detailed and include all grades, it was said.

"The biggest challenge with that was the grade descriptors weren't fully there so we went for an A to a C to an E, and there was a lot of ambiguity around those grade descriptors which led to a lot of arguments because there were people fighting for their kids for certain marks."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Some interviewees who graded GCSEs with higher proportions of NEA, such as Art and Drama, said that they had to adjust their teaching to generate evidence that matched the weightings of evidence that came from exams and from NEA.

"There were grade descriptions available. We used those. It was really hard with the practical subjects... so we had to adjust all of our lessons... We just followed the WJEC weighting. For example, Unit 1 in GCSE Drama; it's 40% with two parts of course work. It was unfair to make that different and to make, maybe, the exam paper 40%... We tried to keep it as close as possible to the weighting to make it fair."⁴

Head of Department

A small number of interviewees felt the grade descriptors did not need to be improved. Most of these said that the descriptors were useful as they are, whilst one interviewee said that they did not feel that they needed them in the first place.

"I liked the grade descriptors, actually. They were useful in helping us make the difficult decisions after the written paper was there. So, I think they were the least problematic part of the process."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

⁴ *"Roedd disgrifiadau gradd ar gael a fe defnyddwyd rhain. Roedd yn anodd iawn gyda'r pynciau ymarferol... felly, roedd rhaid i ni addasu ein holl wersi... fe wnaethon ni ddilyn pwysoli CBAC. Er enghraifft, Uned 1 mewn TGAU Drama; mae'n 40% gyda dwy ran o waith cwrs. Roedd yn annheg gwneud hynny'n wahanol a gwneud, efallai, y papur arholiad 40%... Ceisiodd pawb gadw mor agos â phosibl at y pwysoli i wneud y broses yn deg."*

3.1.4.2. How were grade boundaries used?

Interviewees were asked an open question about which grade boundaries they used, and how they used them. Most said that they used the grade boundaries set by awarding bodies. Interviewees tended to either choose a grade boundary from one particular year and adapt it to their assessments, or work out the average from different grade boundaries over recent years and apply that instead.

"We used the grade boundaries on the WJEC website. Any content that was on the exam... we chose the adapted papers that better fitted what our pupils had done, because the topics were varied across the papers. So, in all subject areas we had free rein; we picked what ones we wanted but other than that, we didn't deviate."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

One interviewee said that they also used the WJEC's grade boundaries as a base, but changed them to recognise when learners had clearly memorised the papers in advance. Another interviewee said that they did not use the WJEC's grade boundaries because they felt that they did not fit the assessments that they used.

"We did not use the grade boundaries as designated from the exam boards, because we didn't think they were applicable given the form of the assessments that were given. So, in advance we thought of where the grade boundaries should be. For some subjects, the grade boundary that was given in the exams was used, but for most it wasn't because the nature of the examinations meant there was a different style. But, we... looked at what those grade boundaries would represent, how they corresponded to the grade descriptors, and to see how accurate they were and then we threw our data... into the traditional expectations of our grades, and they were more or less there."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.1.4.3. How were borderline cases handled?

Most interviewees said borderline cases were dealt with during the internal standardisation process. This tended to mean that borderline cases were double marked to come to a final decision.

"We shared our marks across the department and marked each other's work and where there was some doubt or borderline cases, we discussed it as a whole department. But we have to do that every year in any case before we send any samples off to the WJEC."⁵

Head of Department

Whilst most respondents seemed confident when dealing with borderline cases, many said that this was stressful because of the threat of appeals from learners or parents, or scrutiny from awarding bodies, reflecting concerns expressed in response to other questions.

Some respondents explained that their holistic approach was used with borderline cases whereby learners were awarded grades which took account of their previous work.

⁵ "O ni'n rhannu darnau o waith gyda'n gilydd, a chadw ambell ddarn o waith nôl os oedd unrhyw amheuaeth am y marc i sicrhau fod pawb yn yr adran yn cytuno. Ond ni'n gorfod neud hyn pob blwyddyn ta' beth cyn i ni anfon sampl a bwydo'r marciau mewn i CBAC."

"I would say, this holistic approach we took more towards our A level students as it was going to determine their future... That doesn't mean, however, that we moved students up millions of grades. It was, sort of, if they would be borderline A and evidence of class tests show they were an A, we would move them up."

Head of Department

3.1.4.4. How were holistic academic judgements understood and used?

Interviewees were also asked what they understood by WJEC's overall grading guidance on making holistic academic judgements, and how this worked in practice.

All interviewees understood that making holistic academic judgements meant that they should consider learners' wider performance when considering their grades, rather than single assessments.

Most interviewees explained that if a learner did particularly poorly in an assessment, then teachers could compare it with their performance throughout their GCSE study. They could then make amendments to their grade to better reflect what they felt learners had shown themselves to be capable of.

Some interviewees explained that they marked down learners who they suspected had accessed publicly available papers. The grades that these learners received were also said to better reflect their previous performances throughout their study.

"The way that it worked was we all had our own class-based tests throughout the year to see how they were doing. We could use those to an extent... My grades were still inflated... [Although] one came out with an E and one came out with a D. The E grade one obviously thought he worked hard enough at memorising the mark scheme to get higher than an E."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A few interviewees said that they did not make holistic academic judgements, instead choosing to base learners' grades entirely on their performance in their assessment(s). The reason for this was that it would have been too time-consuming to give a fair holistic approach to every learner's grade and so it was not practical to do so.

"The word 'holistic' implied to us when it first came out that it should be over a long period of time, but it became quite evident that that was going to be very difficult... So, I think four assessments was enough... I don't think we could have fitted any more in to be honest."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

"So, it's very difficult to really put in place a holistic picture of every single child when you're dealing with hundreds of students... On a day-to-day practice, if you've got 200 to 300 people in your cohort, you can't do that."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.2. Training and guidance

3.2.1. Awareness of roles and responsibilities

Interviewees were asked how clear they were on their roles and responsibilities throughout the grading process. Nearly all confirmed that they were very clear on their roles and responsibilities and felt confident in their abilities to carry out the work required.

Interviewees frequently mentioned the value of the support they received from colleagues and leadership teams to ensure understanding and clarity.

"Our Senior Leadership Team were fantastic, and they told us exactly what we needed to do... I felt very grateful to be part of this school because they put so much time into telling us what we needed to do and that was fed down really well through staff meetings."

Head of Department

Some described how information was disseminated to all staff through meetings, presentations, centre guidance and online centre support.

"Once we had clarity on an announcement or change with qualifications, I would do a video presentation. I'd talk through that and that was then shown in subject meetings and faculty meetings. Then, when it came to doing a particular process like moderation, whilst there was a form for [teaching staff] to fill in, there was also a step-by-step guide that I'd written.... I [created] a... single document that had all of the hyperlinks on it that was updated regularly and went out to all of the staff, so that everybody had a single place to go to, to find the correct guidance and then to find the correct form as evidence to use all the way through."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Making training available for staff was an issue that was overcome in some cases by maximising the use of non-teaching time, it was said.

"For the staff, we were trying to use training time. We met with all the Directors of Learning and gave them all the information and they met then within their faculties and cascaded that to the rest of the staff. It was quite a rigorous and thorough process."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One interviewee said that preparing plans for submission to WJEC in the first instance had helped to define staff roles and responsibilities at all levels within their centre.

"Part of the initial process was to publish our own plans and submit them to the WJEC and within that we made it very clear about individual roles... all the way through the process... that was mapped out really carefully. There were occasional tweaks along the way when we realised there might be an extra piece of work but on the whole, in terms of roles and responsibilities, from the chair of governors to the head, through me, down to teaching staff, it was important that we did work our way back."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Some interviewees mentioned the value of staff working well together and with rigour towards a fair outcome for learners.

"As the year progressed, yes [our roles and responsibilities became clearer] because we knew that our decisions would have to be as rigorous as possible. So, we did standardisation of marking... we would mark a few papers or assessments and then we would get together as a team to look and see if we were all singing from the same hymn sheet. Three of us have worked together for about 15 years so we think as one, so there wasn't much discrepancy. So, we had standardisation and then we went ahead and marked and then we Ived [independently verified] each other's work as well."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

One participant also highlighted how their role was reactive and they responded throughout the process to the guidance as it arrived from Qualifications Wales.

"Well, as more information came from Qualifications Wales, you responded to what you had to do. I knew from the start that... we just had to get it right. But it was new and unknown for us all. It was more reactive: 'Oh, we need to do this, we need to do that'. I think from the outset, it became quite clear that it was our role to ensure that we put in place processes that were fair and equitable to all our students... we gave centre determined grades that the exam board would award eventually that were not only fair to this year's cohort but were fair to cohorts previous and cohorts of the future because that's really important."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Some interviewees described how they explained their centre's grading processes to learners and parents to reassure them of the rigour and fairness of their approach via remote meetings, printed information for parents, and assemblies with learners.

"As we were having information, we were relaying it to staff, to carers, to students. We had parent briefings... Zoom meetings with parents... present to them the information we'd been given; how we were going to do it. We'd talk them through our centre grade policy... we sent it out - every parent had a copy of it. We had online assemblies... and then when they came in after Easter, we had physical assemblies where we went around to the classes to talk to them."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Interviewees also mentioned the need for them to be clear over their roles and responsibilities because of the fear of quality assurance from WJEC at the end of the process, reflecting previous feedback.

Some interviewees who had previous experience of marking external examinations felt they had an advantage over others and were, therefore, more confident in the process.

"I do teach WJEC exams as well, so I understand enough... we had some units [staff] that were a bit newer to the job. You could see they wanted a bit more support sometimes, as some of them weren't sure what was going on... Someone older [in a higher position] was needed to lead people."⁶

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

When asked what support they would have liked to clarify their roles and responsibilities, interviewees came up with several suggestions:

⁶ *"Rwy'n dysgu arholiadau CBAC hefyd, felly rwy'n deall digon... roedd gennym ni rai unedau [staff] a oedd yn newydd i'r swydd a llai profiadol. Roedd yn amlwg fod eisiau ychydig mwy o gefnogaeth arnyn nhw weithiau, gan fod rhai ddim yn siŵr beth oedd yn digwydd ... Roedd angen rhywun hŷn i arwain pobl."*

- Earlier, firm, clear, consistent decisions and notifications of changes to avoid anxiety, pressure, confusion, and difficulties.

"By the time that we were supposed to be doing training... we were already being expected to run exams and tests and be marking them and grading them and also making sure that there wasn't any unconscious bias or potential problems with the exam papers themselves and we had to prepare the exam papers or test papers in January and February for running exams in March and April."

Exams Officer / Manager

- Videos showing best practice in moderation and standardisation.

"Maybe videos would have been better than just the PowerPoint – actually someone explaining to you, and I would have quite liked to have seen examples of what a good process looks like... What does good moderation look like... good standardisation meetings."

Head of Department

- Sample assessments, particularly for new subjects.

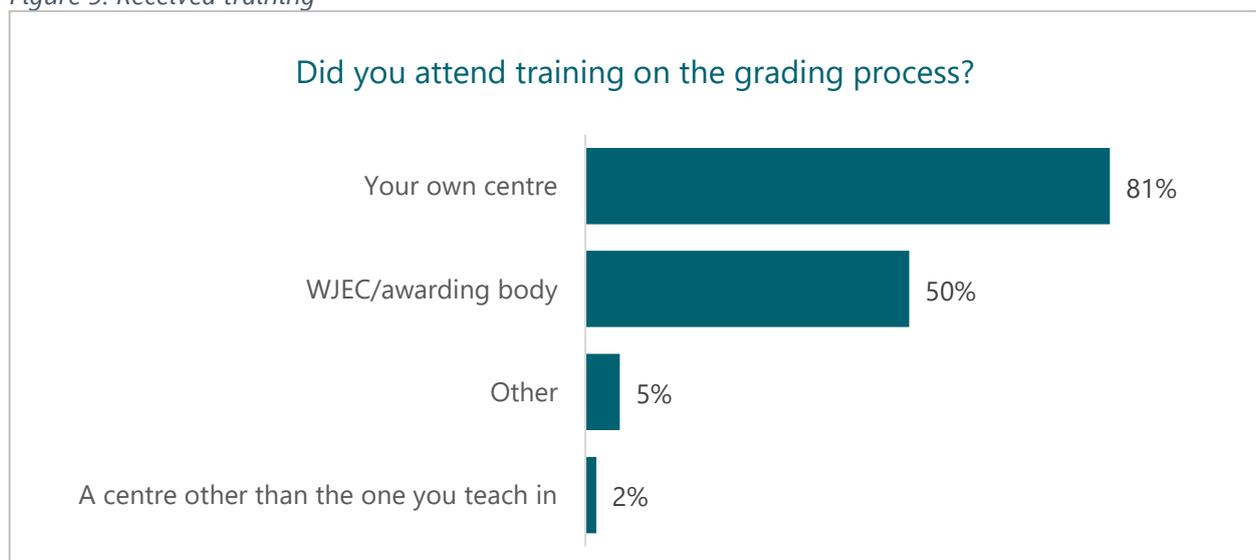
"It would have made it easier if there were some other sample assessments, just purely because this was a new qualification. I think if it had been the year before and Health and Social had been running a long time then, there would have been dozens of exam papers that could have been selected that probably all children had never seen."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.2.2. Awareness of training and guidance

Respondents were asked if they were aware of guidance about making objective judgements provided by WJEC/the awarding body. Most (84%) respondents were aware of this guidance, whilst around one in ten respondents (11%) said they were not aware of it, and 6% weren't sure. Respondents were also asked if they had attended training on the grading process.

Figure 9: Received training



Base = 301 respondents

Around four in five (81%) respondents had attended training provided by their own centre, whilst half had attended training given by WJEC/the awarding body. Five per cent of respondents said that they had attended 'other' training, with online workshops and watching training videos being among the responses mentioned by respondents.

3.2.3. Effectiveness of training and guidance

Interviewees were asked how effective the training and guidance was, which was provided by Qualifications Wales and by WJEC/the awarding body, when making grading decisions.

Interviewees, by and large, felt that the training and guidance received from Qualifications Wales and WJEC was clear, helpful, supportive and effective for making grading decisions.

"It got clearer as it went on... I think the training materials were pretty good for what was needed at the time. It couldn't have been much less I don't think. Amongst my staff I never had a question I couldn't answer, which I think shows it was worthwhile."

Head of Department

Several interviewees specifically praised the training in unconscious bias and standardisation.

"We went on the training with the WJEC and looked at standardisation. I learnt a lot, actually, about the halo syndrome... and about being biased, prejudgement based on the pupil... The training by WJEC... was beneficial... very handy... and this is something that came from Qualifications Wales – a range of other evidence that has been done in a fair environment, replicated under exam conditions, where possible."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Another stated that the dissemination and explanation of the overall approach to grading from the Welsh Government Design and Delivery Advisory Group (DDAG) was particularly helpful.

"We were very lucky not just being able to take on board the WJEC training, but I also attended the DDAG [Welsh Government Design and Delivery Advisory Group] sessions. Through our consortium we had sessions where we had access to both a speaker from Qualifications Wales and the Chief Executive from WJEC as well as with members of the DDAG group, and they had to clarify the processes. Some of the exemplar materials that were put online were very helpful as well."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Having direct support from a subject officer in WJEC was particularly helpful for one interviewee.

Another commended the WJEC training videos and explained how they logged which members of their staff had completed this training to ensure that staff in all subjects were involved.

One interviewee, though, was divided about the quality of this guidance. On the one hand they valued the training about adopting a non-biased approach, but felt that the training had not adequately informed them of their role in the whole process.

"I'm torn on this one, because I did all the training on the WJEC website and found some of that very interesting, especially the bit about looking at results with a non-biased approach... But I also felt that the training didn't tell me what my role was."

Head of Department

Another was hard pressed to comment on other aspects of the training, other than it being perceived by them as necessary to protect staff from litigation.

Some interviewees, as already mentioned, gained information and guidance directly from senior staff within their centres who had received the training from Qualifications Wales and WJEC. A few of them felt that receiving the information and guidance from school leaders had been effective, especially when staff were allowed sufficient time for the training within the school day.

"I received no training directly from WJEC or Qualifications Wales. All the information I got to make the decisions I made came directly from my Senior Leadership Team or my Head of Department. I'm presuming that they had some training or watched some videos and disseminated that information or condensed that information down to a PowerPoint which we used to help guide us."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Conversely, one interviewee noted that they had received no training and speculated that training might have been for senior leaders only.

"I don't feel like we did have any training. We had a lot of guidance in the information, the literature that was coming out from WJEC in terms of grade descriptors and processes... but in terms of actual training – whether that happens in senior leadership level, but certainly on a departmental level, I don't think that we did have training."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Several interviewees felt the videos from WJEC, although useful, were too long and not sufficiently user-friendly, bearing in mind that staff were under considerable pressure at the time.

One interviewee mentioned that guidance from the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) also had to be considered, which added to work pressures.

Several interviewees complained that sometimes training, information, guidance and past paper questions arrived too late, contributing further to pressure on staff. One Head of Department described the online training as *"bitty"*, *"all over the place"*⁷, and *"hard to keep up with."*⁸

Some were also worried by the lack of guidance concerning the evidence required from schools to make grading decisions. This, some believed, led to variations in making decisions based on evidence between schools, which was highly concerning for some teaching staff. This point reflects a recurring theme throughout the report relating to some centre staff's perception that not all centres adopted a fair and rigorous grading approach.

"I found the general guidance useful but quite vague in parts and there was a degree of interpretation needed from the school that made individual teachers and myself slightly concerned that was it being applied across all schools."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One interviewee felt that the information and training provided for grading was superficial and not sufficiently detailed for new members of staff or for schools where staff had no previous experience of grading.

"If you're a new teacher or work in a new school, and you have not got experience of external marking or a bank of experience from previous years... then I think it would have been very difficult"

⁷ *"ar hyd y lle"*

⁸ *"anodd cadw i fyny ag ef"*

*indeed for you... I think it would have been better to have given every member of staff that same training at the beginning of this process."*⁹

Head of Department

Another interviewee felt there was a lack of consistent guidance provided during training.

"In my role as overseeing examinations, I went onto every single training they provided. You'd go on one... and then [another], and they were giving a different viewpoint. There were quite a lot of different people speaking and they didn't always seem to be consistent in what they were saying, so sometimes you'd come off and think, 'I'm not really sure... and you'd have to go back through and read the material."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

A few interviewees criticised WJEC for leaving most of the responsibility for grading to schools and other centres.

*"It was almost as if the WJEC had disappeared completely into the wallpaper [background]. I'm here teaching, marking, assessing and standardising as well as creating all these documents, so what were the WJEC doing during this time?... It felt like we were driving through the fog at times and that the WJEC were nowhere to be seen."*¹⁰

Head of Department

3.2.3.1. Were there any differences in the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales and awarding bodies?

Interviewees were asked to comment on their perceptions of the differences between the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales, WJEC and other awarding bodies.

The overall perception was that Qualifications Wales is the strategic over-seeing body, giving little local support to centres, whereas WJEC is responsible for the detailed organisation of and centre support for each qualification.

"We get the occasional letter that comes from Qualifications Wales that then gets sent to all of us, but management really dealt with that and they said, 'this is what is expected' and then we had the training to show what it meant in real life."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

One interviewee, who dealt with different qualifications' regulators from across the UK as part of their role, compared Qualifications Wales favourably with the other regulators in terms of the clarity of the guidance and the quality and timeliness of the training they provided.

⁹ *"Os y'ch chi'n athro newydd neu'n gweithio mewn ysgol newydd, ac oes na 'da chi brofiad o farcio allanol na banc o brofiad gwaith o'r blynyddoedd cynt... rwy'n credu byddai wedi bod yn anodd iawn i chi... Rwy'n credu y byddai wedi bod yn well rhoi'r un hyfforddiant i bob aelod o staff ar ddechrau'r broses hon."*

¹⁰ *"Roedd bron fel petai CBAC wedi diflannu'n llwyr i'r papur wal [cefnidir]. Dw i yma'n dysgu, marcio, asesu a safoni yn ogystal â chreu'r holl ddogfennau hyn, felly beth oedd CBAC yn gwneud yn ystod y cyfnod hwn?... Mi oedden ni'n teimlo fel ein bod ni'n gyrru drwy'r niwl ar adegau ac nad oedd CBAC yn unman i'w weld."*

"I think Qualifications Wales was probably the best of the three governing bodies [sic] to provide information and guidance. The information that we got from them, and the training was better and earlier than the other qualification bodies. That made a big difference because we felt that we were supported earlier...I organised a huge amount of training for the teaching and senior leadership staff. To do that I had to do the training first to understand what it was going to look like and to be there to help us support them."

Exams Officer / Manager

One interviewee commended the online training and guidance that WJEC provided for the Welsh Baccalaureate (Welsh Bacc). They also valued consulting with colleagues who were heads of the Welsh Baccalaureate in other schools throughout the process.

"Welsh Bacc did some online training which was classic, and it was just nice to speak to other Heads of Welsh Bacc who are going through the same thing and just know that the same problems were coming up across the board... So, I felt very secure because of having done that. The guidance was just so clear."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.2.3.2. How could the training and guidance have been improved?

Interviewees were asked how the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales, WJEC and awarding bodies could have been improved. They made several suggestions, which are presented below.

- Final decisions should have been made sooner and before schools had prepared their policies and shared them with stakeholders. Also, decisions should then have been firm and not changed. It was suggested that this would have saved a lot of wasted effort by teachers.

"It could've come earlier... You've written a policy, shared a policy, had it ratified and then a piece of guidance comes out and you just think, '...we could've done it this way', and you've already committed to doing it a different way that is much more labour-intensive."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

This same problem was reported to face teachers in the current year where they are having to prepare for the possibility of centre determined grades and exams.

"What I feel now... is there's a danger in schools, we are being asked to prepare students for an exam but in the background prepare them for a centre determined grade. How do you do both? At least last year we knew there were no exams."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Clearer, more robust, prescriptive processes are needed for teachers to follow to reduce the burden on centre staff and to offer a standardised approach between centres to reduce variation. Webinars and videos were suggested.

"Again, slightly more prescriptive. Although we were grateful that they trusted our professional judgement, it did lead to that issue of hearsay and jungle drums beating about what was happening in other places and you had to hold your nerve in those instances to make sure you don't start panicking and inflating grades because you hear rumours."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Examples of work and more detailed grade descriptors should be provided for further guidance. Subject specific examples would be helpful too.

3.3. Internal standardisation

3.3.1. Working within centres to agree grades

Interviewees were invited to explain how staff worked together within their centres to agree grades during the internal standardisation process.

Interviewees described close cooperative working with staff within their own departments and at senior management level to apply rigour and achieve fair outcomes for their learners. They described processes for checking and re-checking results, using colleagues to re-mark assessments.

"In my subject, there were four teachers. So, we made sure another teacher marked at least four pieces of work from ourselves and if they agreed with it within a few percent - absolutely happy. If it was outside that range, we had to take a bigger sample. Any time we didn't agree with anything, we discussed and fed back to each other as to why. As we went through the process, we realised it was better to do that at the start of the process, almost like an exam standardisation meeting, but, again, it was just time. The first few we had to do retrospectively. Towards the end, we marked a few to begin with and we agreed on a mark scheme, shared each other's work, and then we were happy to mark the rest and that made more sense."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

The usual procedure described by interviewees was for each teacher to grade their own learners for their subject across the various sources of evidence and pick a sample of these for a colleague to moderate using examination board guidelines. Where a centre had more than one subject specialist for the level being marked, the subject leader would moderate to try to standardise across the teachers in the first instance and then papers would be passed to the director of learning. For single subject teachers, moderation of the sample would pass directly to the director of learning.

"The class teacher would mark the work, then the teachers would get together and standardise a cross-section of students; more, or less, talented; boys and girls. We then looked at it all, and I had the final say on the marks. After we did all the assessments, the practical ones, coursework, written work, the exam, we got together with one of the senior leaders that deal with monitoring and tracking. He helped us look at the maths."¹¹

Head of Department

Interviewees also noted that they adopted various approaches to quality assurance: marking each other's work before being passed to the subject specialist; ensuring anonymity of marking; discussing grading decisions at faculty meetings, panels, and focus groups. The involvement of senior management teams in grading decisions was also seen to be important in ensuring consistency.

¹¹ "Byddai'r athro dosbarth yn marcio'r gwaith, yna byddai'r athrawon yn dod at ei gilydd ac yn safoni trawstoriad o blant; mwy, neu lai, talentog; bechgyn a merched. Yna edrychon ni ar y cyfan, a chefais i'r gair olaf â'r marciau. Ar ôl i ni wneud yr holl asesiadau, y rhai ymarferol, gwaith cwrs, gwaith ysgrifenedig, yr arholiad, daethom ynghyd ag un o'r uwch-arweinwyr sy'n delio â monitro a thracio. Helpodd e ni i edrych ar y mathemateg."

"We used faculty meetings, and every faculty meeting had an agenda centre determined grade item. We had staff doing the papers that we'd chosen in different subjects and marking each other's and moderating marks and methods. The way the teams all worked together in the school was really good. Everyone was used for moderation, there was different coding for moderation. There were forums held for the grade descriptors when we were querying those ambiguous grading decisions. We had panels. We talked across subjects, so science and maths got together to discuss particular individuals... we would discuss the anonymously moderated stuff, when we had a grade next to a pupil, we would discuss what we have on that pupil together."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

As part of the process, some interviewees explained that marks were input to spreadsheets and compared with previous years to check whether the expected outcomes were within reasonable thresholds.

"Once we had all the results in the standardisation spreadsheet... I would get my deputy director to go through and then our third in faculty would go through and then I'd check with the person in charge of data in senior management. Once we'd checked the data, you'd have an analysis with expected outcomes to see if we were above or beneath thresholds from the last three to four years. It was a long process from coming up with the grade to then being happy that you'd got it right."

Head of Department

One interviewee explained that as the only teacher of music in their school, they used peripatetic teachers to help them grade their learners' work.

"I was in a department on my own. But I've got a fantastic team of peripatetics. I played all the music to them, and I didn't tell them what I'd graded it as, and they graded it, and then we looked at the grades together."

Head of Department

Another mentioned how teachers across centres helped in the process of overcoming the single teacher issue.

"Our ICT teacher went to visit [another] school, and they had a standardisation and moderation process there. Our geography [and health and social care, and childcare] teachers... anonymised pieces of work and they shared them and marked them together."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One interviewee explained how even before the standardisation process that teachers in their department had discussed the grade requirements for specific questions on papers that the learners were to sit.

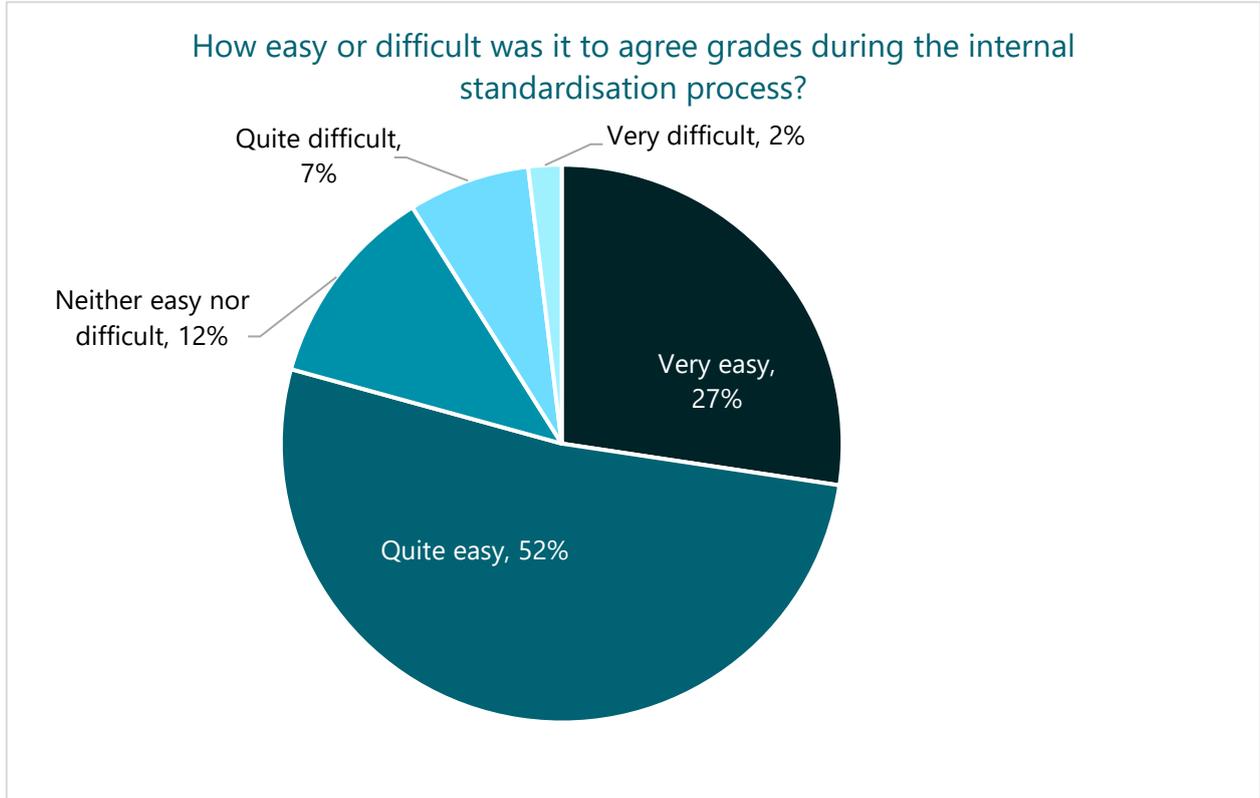
"For standardisation, we just looked at the papers and what we would agree for each question, so ... we went through and looked at ten examples of graphs and how many marks we would give that graph and had some agreement on what we would accept and what we wouldn't... We knew by the time that the grades were awarded that we'd already done the thing of what gets them a good mark and what doesn't. And when I came to moderate, there were very few marks I had to change."

Head of Department

3.3.2. Ease and difficulty of agreeing grades

Survey respondents were asked how easy or difficult it was to agree grades with other staff during the internal standardisation process.

Figure 10: Ease of agreeing grades during the internal standardisation process

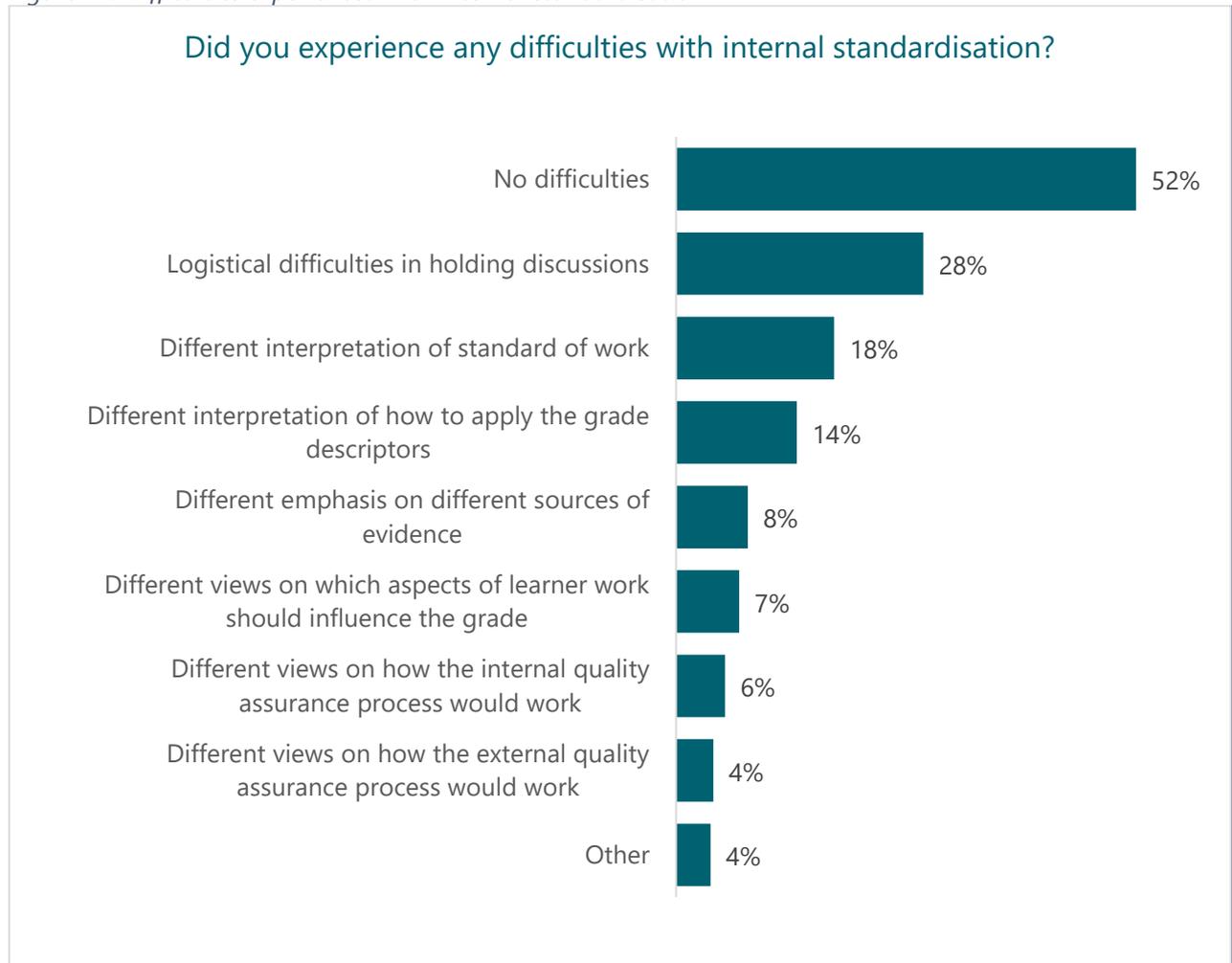


Base = Those involved in standardisation process (314 respondents)

Over three quarters (79%) said that it was very easy or quite easy to agree grades with colleagues during internal standardisation. Just 9% said that it was quite difficult or very difficult to do so, with a further 12% stating that agreeing grades was neither easy nor difficult.

To further examine internal processes, respondents were asked if they had experienced any difficulties when agreeing grades with others as part of internal standardisation in their centre.

Figure 11: Difficulties experienced with internal standardisation



Base = Those involved in standardisation process (309 respondents)

Over half of respondents (52%) reported that there were 'no difficulties' with internal standardisation in their centre. The most common problem experienced during internal standardisation was 'logistical difficulties in holding discussions' which impacted more than a quarter (28%) of those in our survey.

When discussions were able to take place, the most commonly reported difficulties were 'different interpretation of standard of work' (18%) and 'different interpretation of how to apply the grade descriptors' (14%). All other difficulties were reported by fewer than one in ten participants.

3.3.3. Manageability and effectiveness of internal standardisation

3.3.3.1. Overall manageability and effectiveness of internal standardisation

Interviewees were asked to say overall, how manageable, and effective they found the internal standardisation process to be and why.

On the whole, interviewees felt that it was a difficult, time-consuming process, particularly when no extra time was scheduled for it, and when they were having to undertake their normal

classroom activities at the same time. Interviewees frequently described working extensive extra hours over and above the normal school day. All had been committed to the process, however, to ensure rigour and fairness in the interests of their learners.

"It was a lot of work. It was an incredibly stressful time. I don't want to go through that again because we were teaching a normal, full timetable at that point in the summer, and we were expected to not only write the policy, but also to cover the WJEC educational descriptor guidelines that were pretty long. We had to read and understand those and then we had to create assessments. It was us who marked them; we were standardising them, and there wasn't really any extra time left."

Head of Department

The challenges of COVID-19 were also said to add to the complications. On top of teaching, assessments, and grading, interviewees discussed issues such as track and trace; learners moving in and out of isolation, and suffering mental ill health due to the pandemic. This again was said to have placed an increased burden upon staff.

"Incredibly difficult to manage... We were having cases of COVID, and we were having to do the track and trace at the same time – sending kids home, isolating them at the time. So, if this was the only job that we had, it would have been manageable but to do this and run a school, and teach lessons, it was very time-consuming and the number of hours that our staff were putting in above and beyond the school day was really quite extensive."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Interviewees stressed the adverse impacts of the grading process and of the pandemic on the private life, mental health and wellbeing of staff and learners. Some were also concerned that the process had been unfair to learners in lower year groups who missed out on teaching and assessments. These issues are discussed in more detail under the "manageability" sub-section of this report.

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

There were a few interviewees, however, who felt that the process had been manageable. It is notable that these interviewees had been given time within the school calendar to undertake grading, moderation, and standardisation.

"It was fine... Wednesday afternoon meeting slots were given over to it, so we were lucky we were given time. It was not something we were expected to do in our own time... it seems like a big chore – but when we got going with it, was fine. It was manageable and it was important as well. It had to be done. Without doing it, the credibility is gone."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Interviewees also stated that moderation is part of teachers' normal professional practice, and so, well within their capabilities; using spreadsheet analysis had made the process of standardisation easier. They stated that having all learners on site during the process had made the situation more manageable than earlier when there had been a mix of online and site-based lessons.

"In terms of manageable... given that we were in a lucky position of having all our learners on site, that helped us give staff enough time. If we were in the situation where we had some on site and some off site, as we had earlier in the year, then that could've tipped the balance in many respects. So, manageability, a lot of time and effort spent on it, but we felt by doing it that way we could actually give a fair reflection of the pupils. The evidence was reflected in the accuracy of the grades... A lot of work. But, in the end that effort put in across the school was effective in terms of the grades awarded at the end."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.3.3.2. Effectiveness of internal standardisation as a quality assurance process

Interviewees were asked to say how effective standardisation was as a quality assurance process. Most of those we interviewed felt that standardisation functioned well as a quality assurance process. They gave several explanations for this, which are presented below.

- Grade boundaries were discussed and agreed, making marking easier, clearer, and more consistent.

"It opened discussion about the grey boundaries and what looks like a C, what's a B in the different subjects... it allowed for a lot of really good, deep, quality discussions with teachers and going forward that will benefit our staff."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Standard procedures and protocols for standardisation and moderation based on the guidelines are an improvement on the system previously used and are being embedded in the centre.

"[Internal standardisation was] massively [effective], because what we came to realise really early on... was that departments' understanding of moderation was different to what we expected moderation to be... And it was made clear to them that what we mean by moderating is one person setting the standard and one person checks everybody else's marking. So that caused some workload issues early on in the process, and it caused some training issues in those first assessments as they came in. Once that was set up and clear, it was very, very effective."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Established cooperative working between staff to define grades.

"When we all spoke about why we thought a piece should be worth 16 marks, 18 marks, 20 marks whatever, when we actually pooled together the information we had or why something shouldn't have had so many marks, we adjusted it... to make sure we went for the best fit from the three members of staff who worked together on it."

Head of Department

- Opportunities were provided for staff development in standardisation.

"One positive that came out of all of it, is that teachers and colleagues developed... It was good CPD¹² for all teachers... And good practice has come from that; some departments have already said, 'We're in a good position this year because of what we've been through.'"

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- The standardisation process offered insight on the skills of new staff and helped to identify training needs for them.

"It's also given us information on newer teachers; on how accurate their grading is. So, we've been able to use that partly as training as well"

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- It was a flexible process.
- Most of the teachers mark exams in their subject for the WJEC, and so they were confident in their ability and knowledge of how to standardise appropriately.

"A lot of us here are markers for WJEC or other exam boards so it's the sort of thing we're used to. We were quite happy."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

- The use of spreadsheets allowed easy comparison of marks to identify any inconsistencies.

"The way that we produced the spreadsheet would allow us to spot any people where we thought there was an inconsistency. You could see it either way as to whether the marks that we get in the tests were inconsistent or whether the marks that they should have got previously were inconsistent... We looked at it both ways. We were definitely not driven totally by one form or set of results."

Exams Officer / Manager

- Effective working with centres across a local authority to achieve consistency of grading.

"When it came to standardisation, teachers from across all the county schools met in person in a school hall... and we had a face-to-face meeting to go through the standardisation process together. So, we made sure that we had evidence of the grading process and ensured that the GCSE and A level model answers were understood by all."¹³

Head of Department

- The grades achieved were credible and few marks at the end of the whole process had to be altered.

"I didn't get a single script come back to me to check anything. The process of going to the schools must have been enough."¹⁴

¹² CPD = Continuing Professional Development

¹³ "O ran safoni, bu cyfarfod i athrawon o bob un o ysgolion y sir yn fyw mewn neuadd ysgol... a chawsom gyfarfod wyneb i wyneb i fynd drwy'r broses safoni gyda'n gilydd. Felly, gwnaethom yn siŵr bod gennym ni dystiolaeth o'r broses graddio a sicrhau fod pawb wedi deall atebion model i TGAU a Safon Uwch."

¹⁴ "Ges i ddim un sgript yn dod yn ôl i wirio unrhyw beth. Mae'n rhaid bod y broses o fynd i'r ysgolion wedi bod yn ddigon."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A few interviewees criticised standardisation for the following reasons.

- The materials provided by WJEC/the awarding body included some information that was felt to be irrelevant.

"The WJEC provided standardised materials [sic] [which] at times, weren't fit for purpose. So, for example, the maths standardised materials included evidence of how to mark certain questions that had been taken out of the adapted spec. So, I don't need to know how to mark it. So, why are you telling me? I've got another 300 pages of things I've got to read other than this."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Staff found the weight of responsibility for grading difficult.

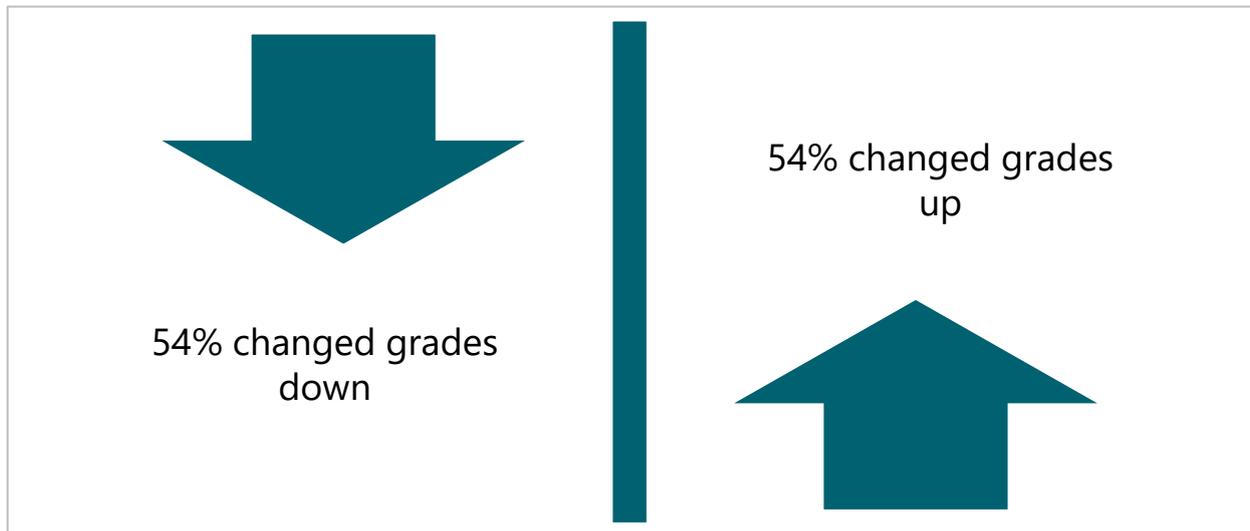
"I think staff found it hard... not in terms of arriving at decisions but hard that they're the ones that made the decisions in terms of pupil performance. But... bearing in mind that we had to base it on evidence, if we were out and the evidence said we were way out then we had to go with the evidence, whether it be too low or too high. That reassured staff."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.3.4. Changing grades following standardisation

Survey respondents were asked whether they changed any grades up or down following internal standardisation.

Figure 12: Change to grades following internal standardisation



Base = Those involved in standardisation process (317 respondents)

Almost two in five (38%) respondents did not make any changes to grades following internal standardisation. Where grades were changed, our survey shows this was equally likely to be up and down with exactly the same proportion of respondents reporting each experience (Note: clearly respondents could have had both experiences with some of their learners having grades moved up and some being moved down).

Interviewees were also asked whether they changed grades up or down and the reasons for this. Most said that they had changed grades, whilst just a few said that they did not. Interviewees gave the following reasons for changing grades.

- Some initial grades did not accurately represent the sum of the individual assessments for certain learners.

"The head was very clear with us to use our professional judgement, and if someone deserved to fail then they should fail. In effect, we did move some students down from a C to a D and in one case from B up to A where it was merited. So, we didn't feel any external pressure to meet grades (targets) or to overperform [inflate grades]... I'm confident that the grades given were wholly deserved."¹⁵

Head of Department

- Grades were moved as part of the rigorous processes established for grading and standardisation.

"In terms of the subject standardisation and model, there were some areas where, on reflection, departments came to me and said, 'it might be too low', 'it might be too high' and had further meetings to reflect that. And their workings had changed. But, by the time it came through to us centrally, pre-appeal, there weren't any grades changed... In terms of moderation, yes there were grades changed because obviously as part of the moderation process, you'd expect that."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Mistakes were made in marking owing to the pressure staff were under. These grades were corrected before being sent to the awarding body.

"When you're marking that number of papers under that intense pressure, there's going to be that odd mistake. I do feel that the processes we had in place ensured that by the time we got to the grading, because we fine-tuned and checked the final grading as well, any issues would have been identified before those grades were sent to the awarding body."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Grades were changed once the grades from previous years were considered.

*"In 2020 I had a really academic class who had fantastic predictions and were going to do really well (compared with previous years' cohorts)... From my subject's point of view there are so many fluctuations, but I was also mindful, for example, about the number of A*s that we tend to get year to year, even in a good year. We tend to only get one or two A*s; we get a few more As, and I was very mindful of that which is partly why one of the children who was A, A* borderline, I marked down."*

Head of Department

¹⁵ *"Roedd y pennaeth yn hollol glir efo ni i ddefnyddio'n barn broffesiynol, ac os oedd rhywun yn haeddu methu yna dylen nhw fethu. Mewn gwirionedd, symudon ni rai myfyrwyr i lawr o C i D ac mewn un achos o B i A lle'r oedd yn deilwng i neud 'ny. Felly, doedd dim teimlad o unrhyw bwysau allanol i gyrraedd graddau nac i orberfformio... Rwy'n hyderus fod y graddau a oedd wedi'u gosod yn hollol haeddiannol."*

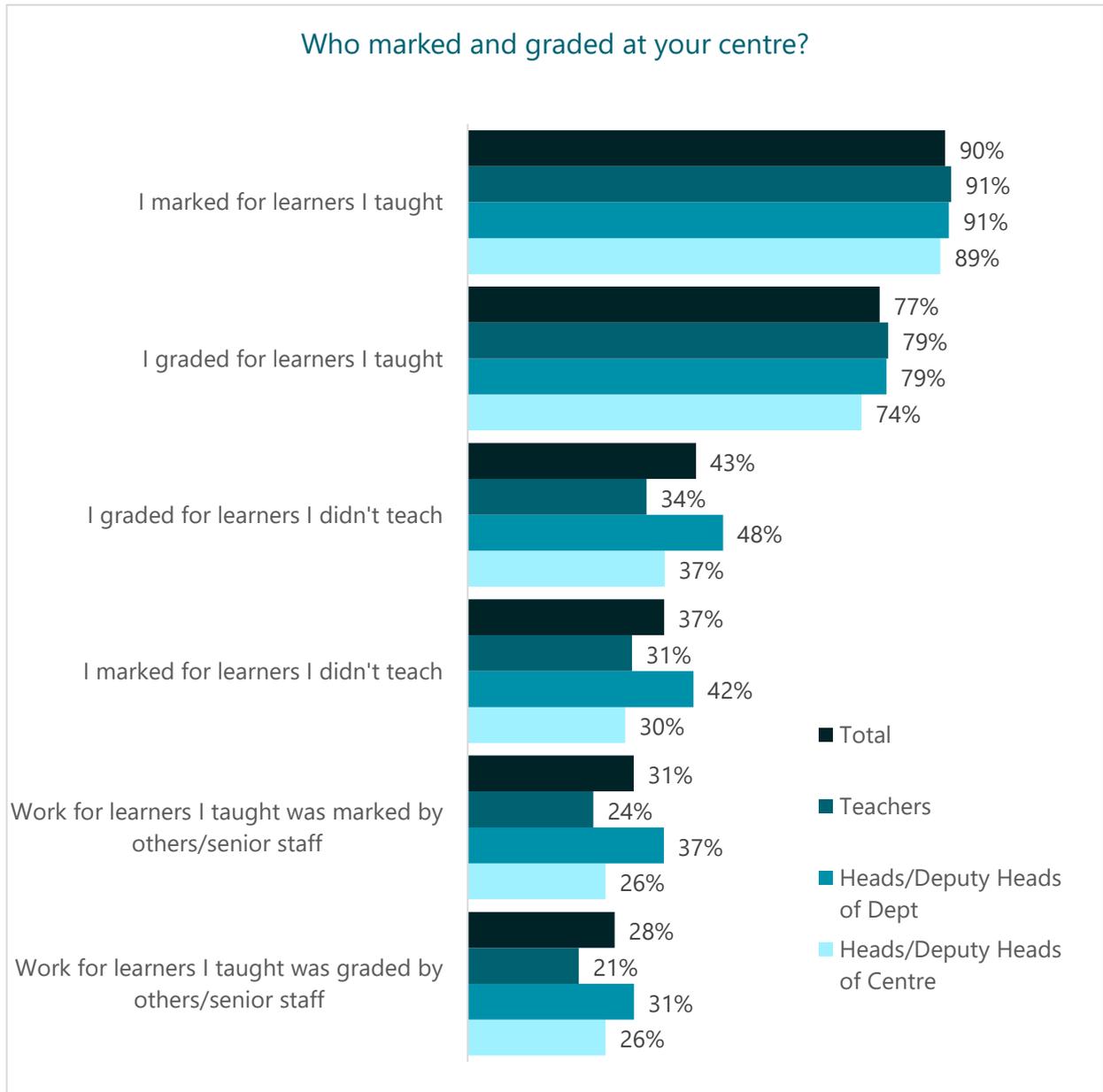
- Some learners who had obviously rehearsed published past papers had this reflected in their grades to better represent their performance and capabilities, reflecting issues raised elsewhere.

3.4. Quality assurance and grade accuracy

3.4.1. Who was responsible for marking and grading?

Survey respondents were asked who marked and graded the assessments which were used to make judgements at their centres.

Figure 13: Who marked and graded the assessments used to make judgements in your centre?



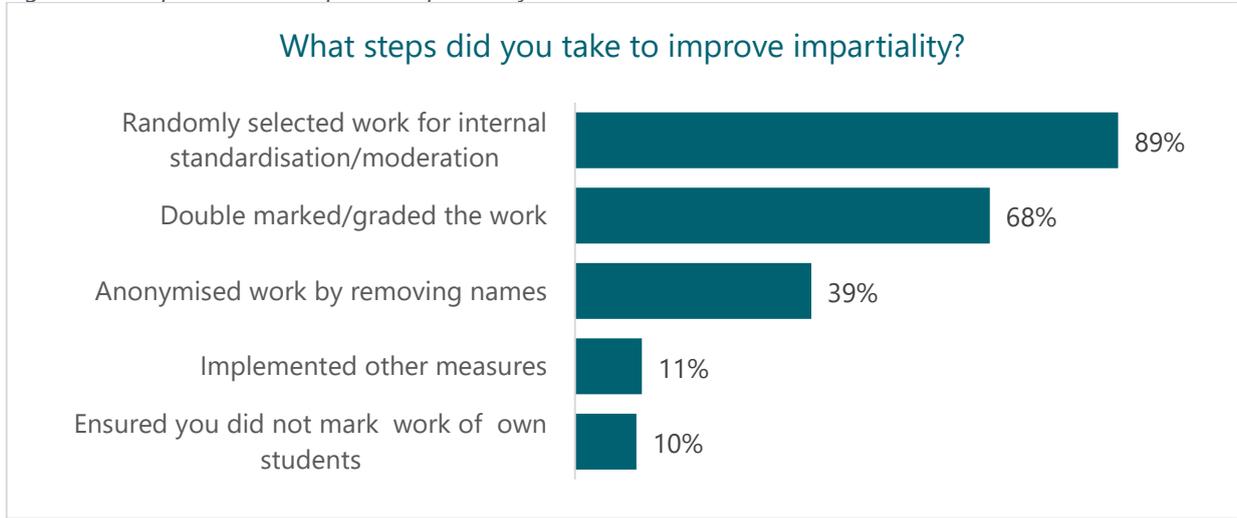
Base = 333 respondents

In most cases, respondents were involved in marking and grading learners that they taught. A lower percentage of respondents were involved in the marking process (37%) and grading process (43%) for learners who they had not taught.

3.4.2. Steps taken to ensure impartiality

Respondents were asked what steps they took when marking or grading work in their centres which were aimed at improving the impartiality of the process.

Figure 14: Steps taken to improve impartiality



Base = 329 respondents

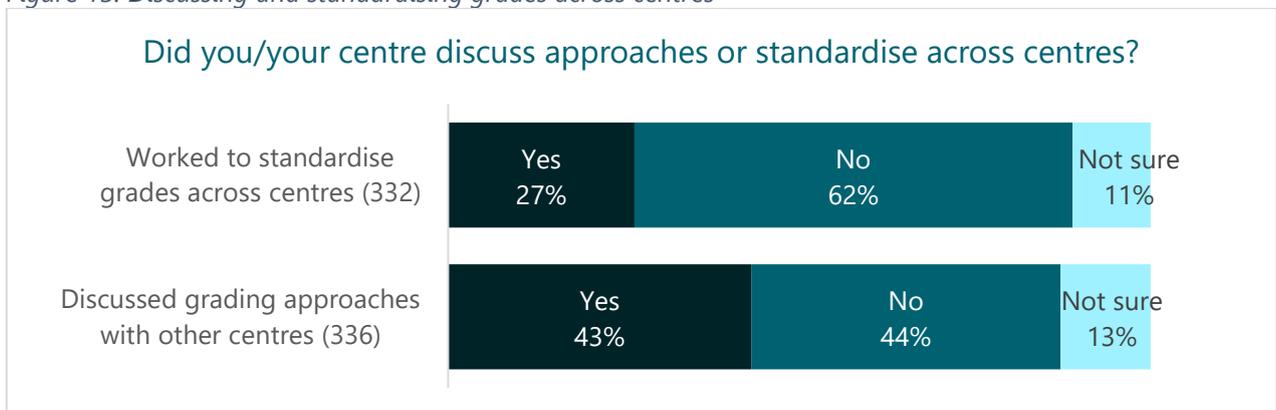
Almost nine in ten respondents (89%) randomly selected work for internal standardisation/moderation in order to improve the impartiality of the process whilst more than two in three (68%) double marked/graded the work. Just under two in five (39%) anonymised work before marking or grading.

Respondents who said that they 'implemented other measures' were asked for more details. The measure which was most mentioned was 'external moderation with other local school(s) in the area'.

3.4.3. Working with other centres

Respondents were also asked whether they discussed grades and/or standardised them across centres.

Figure 15: Discussing and standardising grades across centres



Base number (see brackets)

Just over two in five (43%) were aware of discussions about grading approaches with other centres but far fewer (27%) were aware of any work to standardise grades across centres.

Interviewees were asked if they worked with other centres during grading and standardisation and if they did, what went well or less well with this approach. The themes which arose from their responses are summarised below.

3.4.3.1. What went well when working with other centres?

Interviewees who said that they worked with other centres for grading stated that the following aspects of their relationship went well.

- Sharing ideas on developing centre policy and process.

"So, here in [local authority] the heads work very, very closely with each other. So, when it came to centre policy, for example, that we all had to write, we all worked really closely on that... working with other centres was very, very effective for us... when we had queries, we had a real accurate insight very quickly into how they were approaching it."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Being reassured that their pupils were achieving the right grades.

"It was great to know that what I was doing was right and... accurate and what my pupils were getting was the right level for them. And not just in terms of the short term for this year, at least now I know what I teach over a five-year period works and is accurate. So, I really enjoyed that."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

- Learning good practice and gaining helpful ideas from discussion with other centres. Also, achieving confidence in their own processes.

"A lot of the time it's about interpretation as well, so that sort of informal discussion. Where some centres [were] supplying evidence only collected in the last six weeks... our professional judgement was being used elsewhere, so that gave us confidence in our process."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Achieving a consistent approach and standard across schools in an area. This has the benefit of reassuring parents that the same standards are being applied for all learners living locally.

"It was useful to work with others to make sure you were doing things that aligned with the way they were making decisions, because... there's quite a few schools around us and if you can have some common approach to things then parents do tend to talk. If they know 'that's happening there, but that's happening there', then they feel really assured that it's not different."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Whilst some interviewees mentioned communicating via Teams or WhatsApp, one interviewee said that they had communicated with other centres by email, which had been useful in providing a trail of written evidence which could have been used during appeals.

One interviewee suggested a hybrid system going forward, where centres within consortia cooperate to ensure consistency in grading.

"A hybrid system would work really, really well. That's something I'd want to half-keep because I'd want to know that I'm still doing well and I'm still level with the other centres... If we are going to take a hybrid system, we'd have to do something like that to make sure it is moderated properly."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.4.3.2. What went less well when working with other centres?

On the other hand, some interviewees who had worked with other centres pointed out the following issues or problems with cooperative working.

- The process was already too pressured and working with other centres made it even more so.

"The negatives were that time was precious. We were all so busy, and that school that I personally externally moderated with... had three exam year groups to get through... But at the end of the day, I still have the responsibility of teaching 20 to 21 lessons a week and planning and marking for those, and I've still got the responsibility of getting Year 11 through it and... not just marking my work, but also somebody else's."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

- Too many people trying to work together with little effective organisation to steer discussion and decisions.

"At one point I think we ended up with 12 [subject] teachers on, all saying, 'I do it like this, I do it like this'. It almost became a competition. It would've been better had we said, 'here's a cohort of four Heads of Department, you four work together, you four work together'. Not a county-wide approach. And then maybe one spokesperson from each group just feeds back and then it's collated by a central person just to say, 'overall, this is what's going to be done.'"

Head of Department

3.4.3.3. Would those who did not work with other centres have liked to?

Interviewees who had not worked with other centres to discuss or standardise grades were asked if they would have liked to. Most said that they were under too much pressure to work with other centres and/or they had the necessary expertise within their own centres.

"We did have [the] consortium - all the heads of [subject] got together and to discuss how it was going to be awarded. Once we'd got our method in place, once I had come up with the data and had it checked, we then didn't work with other schools [because] we didn't have time."

Head of Department

However, one interviewee felt that it would have been interesting to compare marking across centres.

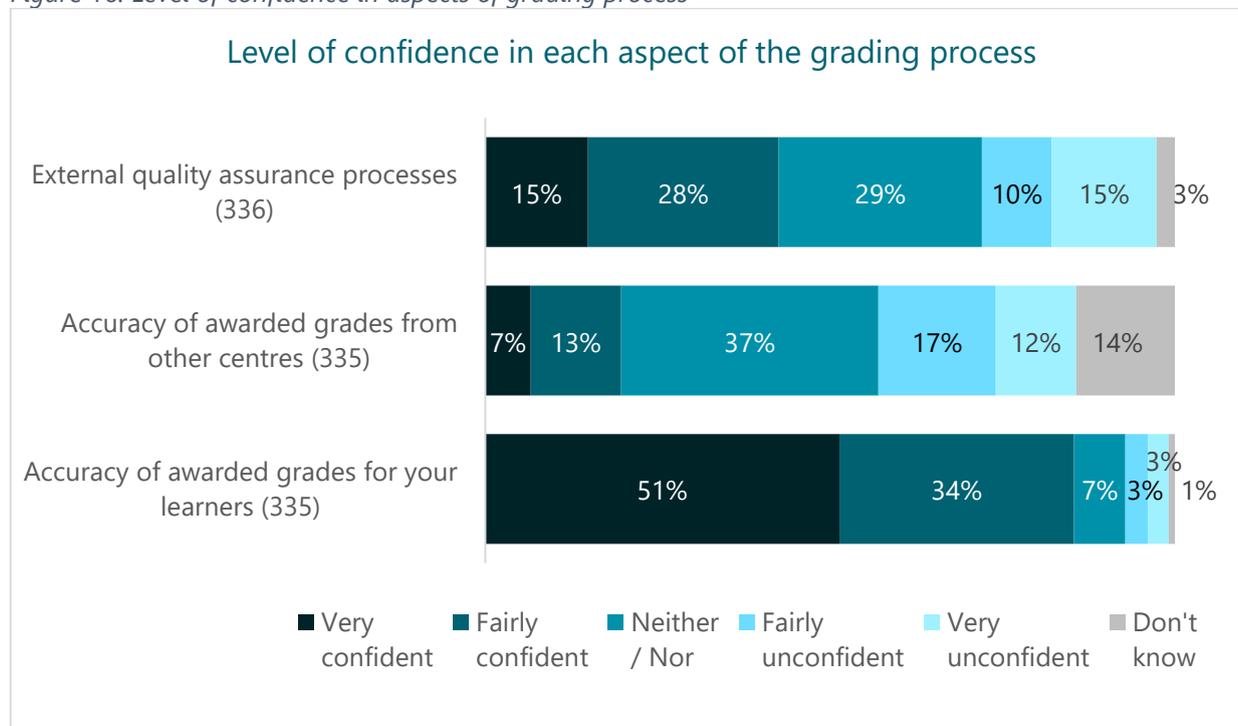
"It would have been interesting to see how other departments had marked their past papers... but with the workload as it was, it would have been another step too far."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

3.4.4. Confidence in quality assurance and grade accuracy

Survey respondents were asked about their levels of confidence in different aspects of the grading system.

Figure 16: Level of confidence in aspects of grading process



Base number (see brackets)

Confidence in the external quality assurance processes run by WJEC/the awarding body varied with less than half (43%) of respondents saying they were very or fairly confident, and 25% saying they were unconfident to some degree.

Respondents were most confident in the accuracy of the grades they awarded for their own learners, where over half (51%) were very confident that their learners had received an accurate grade, and a further 34% stated that they were fairly confident about this.

Respondents' confidence in the accuracy of the grades awarded by other centres was lower. Twenty nine per cent said that they were fairly or very unconfident about this, compared to 20% who said they were confident to some degree.

3.4.4.1. Confidence in external QA processes run by awarding bodies

Interviewees were asked to explain the responses they gave in the survey regarding how confident they were in the external QA processes run by WJEC and/or the awarding body.

Some interviewees who said that they were neither confident nor unconfident about the QA processes were concerned that the processes were too superficial and perhaps insufficient to deal with results from schools which were higher or lower than expected. For example, a few interviewees pointed out that WJEC only considered overall school results with no analysis of the variation in the abilities of student cohorts year on year. This reflects concerns expressed elsewhere about some centres' less rigorous approaches to grading.

"I know we did it the best we could in our school, and that's the important thing. But were our students perhaps judged more harshly and would they have had a better deal in a different school? Because of the way it was quality assured, they were... If you've got fluctuating year groups, it's easy to argue that things might change... You might have a good cohort one year if you've only got 60 students, and then the next year you might have not such a good cohort. I get that. That's why I'm not really convinced either way by the external quality assurance."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Other explanations given for interviewees who stated that they were neither confident nor unconfident in the external QA processes included:

- Information from WJEC arrived late and was unclear and inconsistent on centre roles and responsibilities. WJEC's responsibilities and powers to hold centres to account were also unclear to them.
- WJEC did not do much external quality assurance.
- WJEC did not see learners' work and was unable, therefore, to quality assure it.
- WJEC were inconsistent across centres in their approach to approving centre policy.

"When we sent off our assessment policy, we were sending off a policy which would be quite similar to [another] school because we worked collaboratively, and we would have feedback on different areas. So, one section would be fine, and (for) another centre that section wouldn't be fine... So, we found there was no consistency whatsoever and the fact that we apparently all had our centre policies rejected"

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Reasons given by interviewees who said that they were confident in the external QA processes run by WJEC were as follows.

- Previous experience of moderation.

"I've partially been through a normal moderation process so, I felt very confident that that external moderation process had happened fairly normally... I imagine that other centres maybe wouldn't feel as confident as I did because of going through that."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

- Confidence from knowing that someone would scrutinise the work undertaken.

"I suppose the confidence came in... knowing it was going to... be scrutinised by somebody other than myself. There's quite a lot to it, really. Knowing that it might be just a completely unique experience."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

- Confident because the materials used were specific and easy to follow.

"I was extremely confident because the material... I needed to follow was so very, very specific: 'you need to do this, this needs to be submitted, this needs to be marked, this is how you work your grades out'. It was so easy to follow that I was quite confident that if I could follow it this easily, everybody else could follow it this easily and, therefore, everyone would make the correct decisions."

Head of Department

- Confident because WJEC looked at the data and examples of work from the school.

"They had all of our grades, but they did come back to us and... they asked for specific pupils and their work. So, we scanned their work and sent it off to them, and they were happy with that... I did feel like, 'actually, they are looking at the data.'"

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Interviewees gave several reasons for not being confident in the external QA processes. Some interviewees considered communications with WJEC to be missing or poor and that they had to chase WJEC for information about the QA process.

One interviewee highlighted an issue, mentioned by others, that had they been aware from the outset that WJEC would not be rigorously examining process and evidence, as part of its QA process, then the experience for teachers would have been altogether less burdensome and less stressful throughout. Moreover, the fact that there was minimal rigorous examination of evidence by WJEC did not inspire confidence in the external QA process. This interviewee suggested that best time to quality assure would have been at the planning stage when processes were being devised.

"I'm glad that there didn't seem to be any input from [WJEC], rightly so, but if we had known that we weren't going to have inspectors in pulling all our evidence apart... it would've been a much more pleasant year for everybody. The only time we had quality assurance was when we submitted our grades."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Interviewees made other comments regarding QA processes. These echoed concerns expressed in relation to other questions about different levels of rigour applied by centres. Some feared that their learners would achieve lower grades than in other centres where less rigorous processes were being followed. They reported that WJEC did not appear to be checking this in the QA process, and that this did not inspire confidence.

Some interviewees said they had little to do with WJEC as there were apparently no reasons for WJEC to be involved in any QA issues in their centres or because other staff in their centre dealt directly with WJEC.

3.4.4.2. Confidence in grades awarded by own centres

Interviewees were asked to explain the response they gave in the survey regarding how confident they were in the grades awarded by their own centre. All but one of the interviewees said that they were either very or fairly confident in the grades awarded by their centre, whilst the last remaining interviewee was unsure about this. Reflecting previous feedback, interviewees felt confident in the grades awarded by their centres because of the rigour of their process, and how closely they had followed WJEC's guidance.

The reasons why some interviewees said that they were fairly or very unconfident in the grades awarded by their own centres were the uncertainty of using a new process for assessment and grading, and the fact that learners could access the papers being used in advance (as noted elsewhere).

Similar to some feedback received in relation to external quality assurance, one interviewee said that WJEC reviewing samples of work from their centre made them more confident in their grades overall.

3.4.4.3. Confidence in grades awarded by other centres

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their survey responses in relation to the extent of their confidence in the grades awarded by other centres. Most interviewees said that they felt unsure about this, with only a few stating that they felt more or less confident.

Most interviewees said that they were uncertain or less confident about the accuracy of grades awarded by other centres due to differences in interpreting grading guidance; inconsistent rigour in grading processes; and learners' ability to access past papers online. This, again, reflects points made elsewhere in this report.

One of the interviewees who said that they felt fairly confident in the grades awarded by other centres said that, whilst working with another centre to standardise grading, they noticed that both centres had marked their work very similarly. As a result, they felt fairly confident that some other centres were grading papers appropriately as well.

"...when I marked it, and I didn't look at their grades at all... It was not in the slightest bit massively different... I thought, 'Right, we're actually all thinking about the same thing here. We're all singing from the same hymn sheet'. That was a real confidence booster."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.4.4.4. How did grades awarded compare with predicted grades for university applications?

Interviewees were asked how the grades awarded compared with predicted grades for university applications. Most interviewees said that they had not previously considered how the grades awarded to learners compared with their predicted grades for university applications. However, almost all said that they were not surprised by the results as they were generally in line with how grades would have compared in past years.

"On the whole, probably where we were expecting them. So, they didn't all get their predicted grades. Some of our students missed grades for their university but in a normal year that would have happened anyway."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Although most interviewees suggested that the grades awarded were as expected, a small number said that they somewhat exceeded what they would have in a normal year. One interviewee said that this was the result of the teachers using their own assessments and holistic methods, rather than sitting externally moderated exams as they normally would.

"I haven't done any analysis on that. Let's face it, they're more positive than they would've been if they had sat exams... I think they were at least where they would've been had they sat exams."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

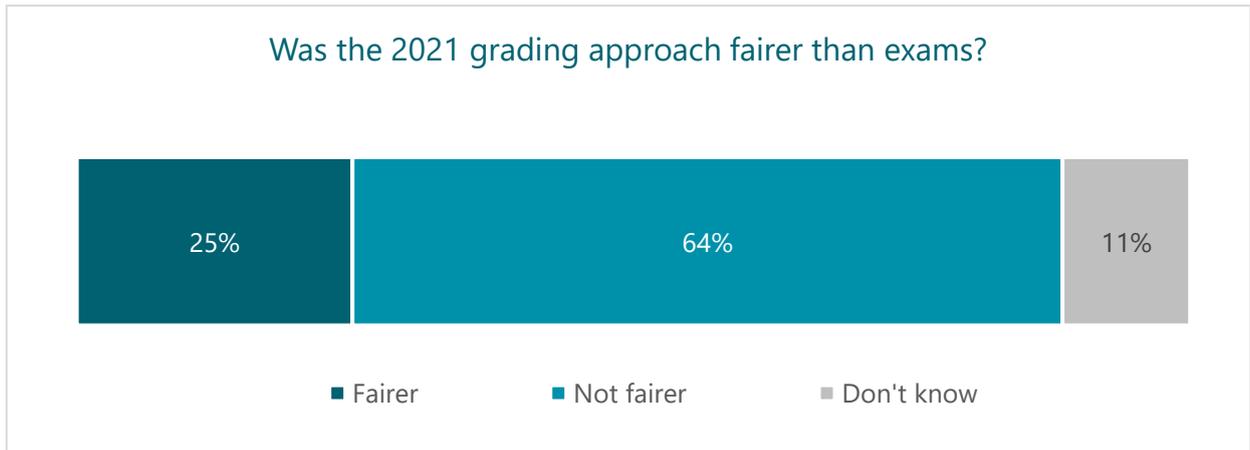
One interviewee said that their learners had genuinely excelled in their abilities that year and therefore achieved higher grades than expected.

3.5. Fairness

3.5.1. Fairness relative to exams

Survey respondents were asked whether they thought that the approach used for grading this year was fairer than in previous years when exams took place.

Figure 17: Was the 2021 grading fairer than in past years when exams took place?

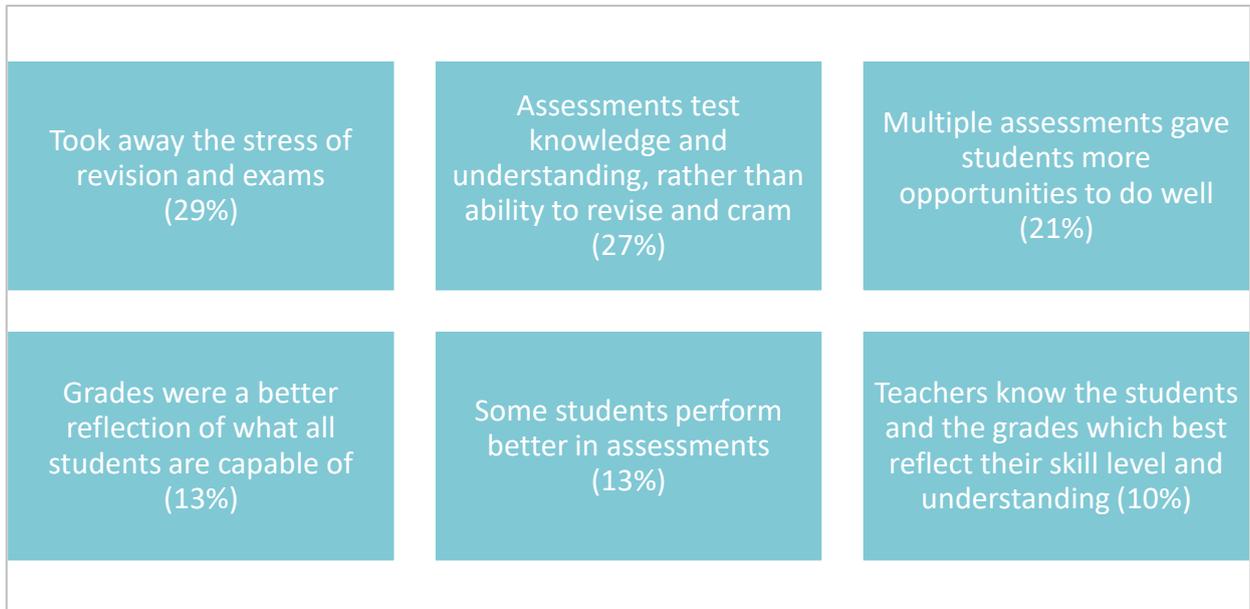


Base = 331 respondents

Overall, a quarter (25%) of survey respondents felt that the approach to grading this year was fairer than in previous years when exams took place.

The key reasons given by those who considered the process to be fairer are shown below.

Figure 18: Reasons why 2021 grading was perceived as fairer



Base = Those who felt the system was fairer (70 respondents)

Around two in three respondents (64%) thought that grading was less fair this year. The three most common reasons given by this group are shown below. Other reasons given were made by fewer than 10% of respondents.

Figure 19: Reasons why 2021 grading was perceived as less fair



Base = Those who felt the system was less fair (190 respondents)

Among those who said they didn't know whether the system was fairer or not, the most frequent comment provided was that the system used was simply the fairest approach given the circumstances.

Interviewees were asked to expand on their survey responses regarding whether they thought that the approach used for grading this year was fairer or less fair than when exams took place.

The issues mentioned most often by interviewees largely reflect points which have already been raised in this report. The most frequent of which was inconsistencies between centres when awarding grades. Interviewees' views differed regarding whether this was due to unconscious bias, the desire for learners to do well, or deliberately advantaging them by providing and "drilling" the exam papers. Some suggested that external quality assurance was needed to increase fairness. Linked to this, a few also noted that while examinations are not the perfect solution, they can provide a level of consistency.

"A blind exam, no one knows what's coming. We know for a fact some schools gave their students mark schemes. They told them what papers they were using, they would drill the papers before they sat the exams. We know that was happening. That just needs to be removed."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

As was acknowledged elsewhere, the publication of past papers was said to offer an unfair advantage to learners and to those who have the drive and inclination to search for the relevant papers and the facilities to do so too.

"I think there was that difference between the haves and the have nots... at the higher end, the learners were more advantaged... at the lower end they could've been more disadvantaged. Depending on what facilities they have at home or what support, or even the inclination to go looking for mark schemes."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Undertaking assessments in classrooms as opposed to halls or other more formal settings was felt to advantage those who may have struggled with the formality in the past, or those considered to be less prepared. Although reducing anxieties around examinations was not considered a bad thing, it was seen to give an advantage to some learners, whereas those who cope well with a formal examination situation did not see any extra benefits.

"Pupils who hadn't attended for months, and then they came in and did warm up lessons then did the assessment did really well. It disadvantaged those pupils who were here every day, doing every bit of work to a very high level, who've gone into the exam off their own hard work and nailed it. Because they have put that effort in."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Some interviewees felt that those highest performing learners may have been put at a disadvantage by teachers' quality assurance. As teachers felt they would be under scrutiny to be fair, this may have inadvertently led to some learners being marked lower than they would have been by completing external assessments. In addition, it was felt that some learners would have benefitted from the opportunity to sit exams but were prevented from doing so by the CDG process.

*"My learners would have done better if they'd sat the exam. I finished last year with 13 A*s with my top set class. Now is that generally in line with predictions? Probably but genuinely, honestly speaking... if anything because of our quality assurance there are a few people... at the top end who I felt would have benefitted sitting the exam because of the skill acquisition."*

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

This was considered a particular issue for learners studying music, as this year teachers marked compositions which they are likely to have given some input to, making it difficult to be objective. To this effect, one interviewee noted that some external quality assurance of the composition by WJEC should have been possible.

"I may have given it as input [feedback] on the child, and I can hear whether or not they've taken that on board in the final composition and performance, so it makes it difficult to step away from the piece when assessing but also gives you more understanding as a teacher into the journey of the pupil. I don't understand why they couldn't have checked and standardised compositions and performances externally this year. I think that would have been a much better way to ensure the process was fair on teachers and pupils."¹⁶

Head of Department

¹⁶ *"Gallaf wedi'i roi mewnbwn ar y plentyn, a dw i'n medru clywed a ydynt wedi ystyried hynny yn y cyfansoddiad a'r perfformiad terfynol, felly mae'n anodd sefyll nôl o'r darn wrth asesu ond mae hyn hefyd yn rhoi mwy o ddealltwriaeth i chi fel athro o daith y disgybl. Dw i ddim yn ddeall pam na allen nhw bod wedi gwirio a safoni cyfansoddiadau a pherfformiadau yn allanol eleni. Byddai hynny wedi bod yn ffordd llawer gwell o sicrhau bod y broses yn deg ar athrawon a disgyblion."*

One interviewee felt that the assessment process had been less fair for learners in state school than private ones. They felt that the increased resources at a private school allowed them to better adapt to the changes in assessment during the pandemic.

"A school... who's independent, who had online teaching throughout the entire lockdown, was able to post home resources to every pupil without having to worry about the cost. That was such a huge advantage over the state school down the road who barely affords to keep the lights on. I feel like we were at an unfair advantage over other institutes."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Among the minority of interviewees who said the grading process had been fairer than in previous years, some perceived that this was the case because they did not feel the previous forms of assessment were suitable and did not always fully reflect a learner's ability.

External examinations were seen by these interviewees to be intimidating and a cause of anxiety among young people. It was said that testing ability on answers given on one day was unfair, and creates a pressurised environment which many learners struggle with.

"We've got a lot of children with a lot of deprivation, mental health issues. All children have it, I know, but we are heavy on free school meals... Our children, some of them, panic massively going into the big hall to do an exam. They were doing them in classrooms. They felt safe, it was a smaller place; it wasn't a hall that they don't normally go into."

Head of Department

Basing grades on a mix of coursework and less formal assessments completed over the course of a year or more was seen to give a fairer reflection of a learner's true ability by these interviewees. It also means that 'having a bad day' which could fall on the day of an external examination, does not impact overall grades so significantly. One interviewee felt this approach particularly benefitted boys.

"We certainly need more of a mix of approaches to get the best out of every child. Especially boys, who find it difficult to revise for a paper in front of them and to sit for two hours. They still had to do the work and we had to provide the evidence, but I think that kind of system suits the boys much more."¹⁷

Head of Department

One interviewee also felt that it was fairer due to assessments being based on a narrower curriculum. As such, learners could revise in a more focused way which gave them confidence, as they felt better prepared.

Of the several interviewees who said they didn't know whether the grading process had been fairer or not, each had different reasons. One felt that there was not enough transparency in the process to understand what was happening in other schools. They noted that processes for grading the Welsh Baccalaureate had been more transparent.

¹⁷ *"Yn wir mae eisiau mwy o gymysgedd o ddulliau i gael y gorau allan o bob plentyn. Yn enwedig bechgyn, sydd yn weld hi'n anodd adolygu am bapur o flaen nhw ac eistedd am ddwy awr. Roedd rhaid iddynt wneud y gwaith o hyd ac roedd rhaid i ni ddarparu'r dystiolaeth, ond rwy'n credu bod y fath o system yna yn siwtio'r bechgyn llawer mwy."*

Another felt unable to answer, as they did not feel grade boundaries were fair before the pandemic.

“Compared to normal years, a normal year is unfair, it’s difficult to know how unfair this year was.”

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Finally, one interviewee felt that, on balance, it was the best way of grading under the circumstances. They felt that the issue previously mentioned, where learners were able to revise using past papers which would have been used for assessment, was the only downside, and may have provided an advantage to some.

“In terms of the system itself, I think it was the best that could’ve been done. The exception I think would’ve been if we’d done new assessment materials or a bank of assessment materials that were not accessible for pupils, then I think that would’ve made the system better.”

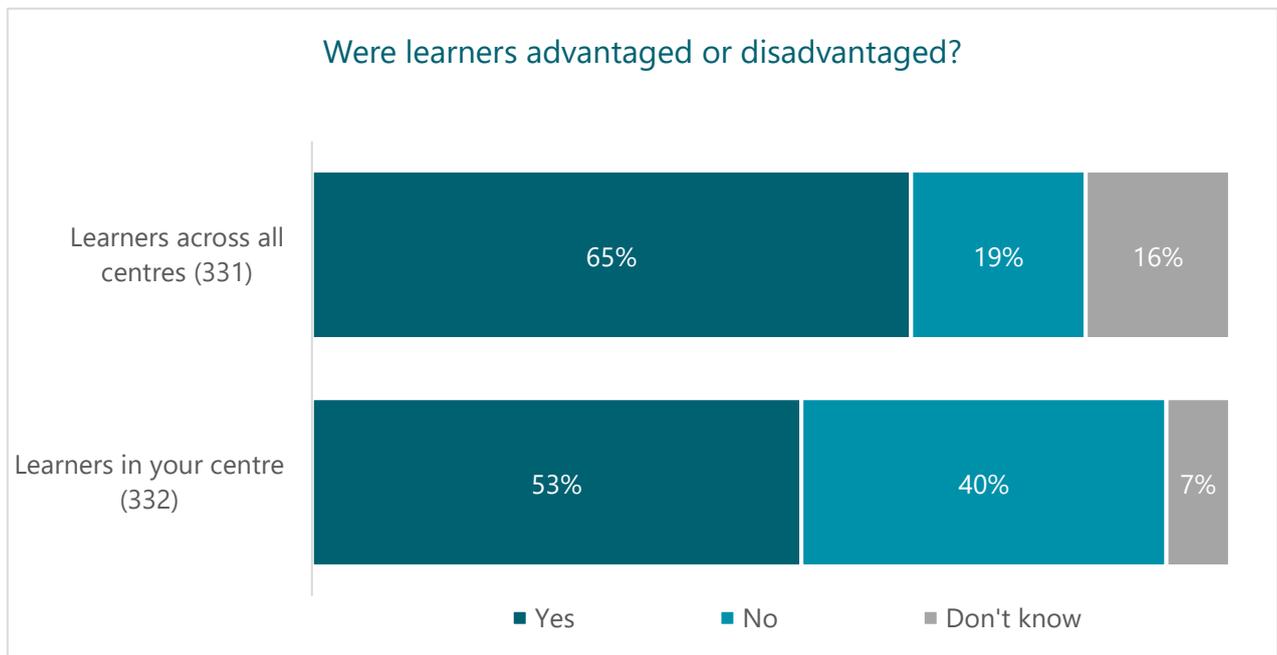
Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.5.2. Fairness for learners

Our survey asked whether those involved in the process felt that any learners had been advantaged or disadvantaged under the 2021 summer grading process.

Almost two in three (65%) respondents felt that some learners had been advantaged or disadvantaged when looked at across all centres and just over half (53%) felt the same was true within their own centre.

Figure 20: Were any learners advantaged or disadvantaged more than others?



Base number (see brackets)

Respondents who perceived that some learners had been advantaged or disadvantaged gave further details on the form this took. The primary concerns raised by respondents again repeated responses made to previous questions. Over one in five of all survey respondents (23%) stated

that learners who had studied published past papers and learnt mark schemes gained higher marks than they would have done, relative to those who did not.

Thirteen per cent of all respondents commented on the perceived lack of external quality assurance which they felt allowed for inconsistencies between centres' approaches to grading. Ten per cent commented that centres' different approaches resulted in some being advantaged or disadvantaged. Other comments were made by a small number of respondents, and largely reflected that some learners perform better in exams whilst others benefit from a more assessment-based approach.

3.5.3. Improving fairness

Interviewees were also asked what could have been done to make the grading approach fairer. Feedback reflected points made elsewhere, specifically:

- Making unseen past papers available.
- Providing a set timetable for at least some assessments across all centres.

"If that paper was sat in a school in north Wales or even our neighbouring school on the Monday, and our pupils weren't doing it until the Wednesday and it was leaked, then our pupils would be at a huge advantage. So, it was because there were no timetables."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

- Undertaking more quality assurance checks and evidence collection across centres.
- Reverting to the grading approach pre-pandemic.

"You are adding in a myriad of possibilities for manipulation of results by leaving each individual centre to decide the grades and are they going to have a consistent approach?... you think that exams are always going to be more consistent than other sources, but you are requiring that the actual examiner who is marking the paper to be consistent as well and they are not always. So, it's a tricky one but there are inconsistencies in whichever approach you take."

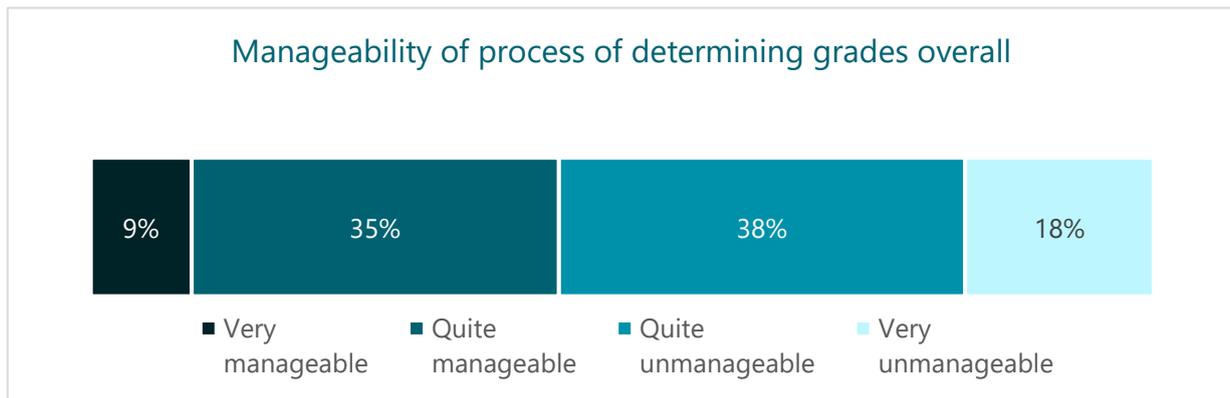
Exams Officer / Manager

3.6. Impacts

3.6.1. Manageability of overall process

Respondents were asked how manageable they found the process of determining the grades overall.

Figure 21: Overall manageability of grading process



Base = 327 respondents

Thirty eight per cent of survey respondents said that they found the process of determining the grades overall to be quite unmanageable, with nearly one in five (18%) describing the experience as very unmanageable. Conversely, 35% said that they found the grading process to be quite manageable, and just 9% found it very manageable.

Interviewees were asked to expand on their survey responses to explore their perceptions of the manageability of the grading process. The main reason given by those who said that they found the grading process unmanageable was the need to complete the process robustly while continuing to teach. This, coupled with the added stress of the pandemic, made the grading process unmanageable for many.

“Just because if you’re dealing with large numbers of students, that is a big undertaking when you are running an operating school. Exam boards, they do this away from a school, in offices, obviously teachers mark outside of hours but it’s all done very rigorous and very robust, not while you’re running a school. We were running a school. I think that was what was forgotten, and that’s what made it unmanageable.”

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Some interviewees recognised that these were emergency measures in unprecedented circumstances. Others noted that the grading process took a lot of time to complete, which had a negative impact on wellbeing, as discussed in the following section.

“[When] I went home every night, I was knackered. I couldn’t do anything on the weekend, I couldn’t do stuff with family, I couldn’t do stuff in the evening because I either had to do some kind of planning, some kind of work, or I was just physically and emotionally knackered.”

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

It was said that this pressure was also felt by learners as it was an uncertain time. An interviewee said that another year of running the process in the same way would not be manageable.

“The pressure on those kids was mounting and mounting and mounting. It’s miserable, for everybody.”

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Other interviewees felt burdened by the fact that information was given late, meaning that they felt rushed to complete the grading in a short amount of time. The short time frame also meant

that some learners had to complete several assessments each day, a cause for concern for teachers.

*"I found it quite tough seeing some of my diligent students being so stressed out and having sometimes up to five assessments in one day, and effectively turning up to my exam in tears. That was difficult. I think in hindsight, we should have extended or stretched the assessment period out a little bit more to make it a little bit less stressful for pupils."*¹⁸

Head of Department

Concerns over how the quality of grading would be managed caused anxiety for some interviewees. They were concerned that their judgement and professionalism would be called into question, or worse accused of malpractice. This raised anxiety meant that the process was said to become less manageable.

"It was a very tense period and highly pressurised. Genuinely people wanted to get it right... felt their professionalism was being called into question. There was always that threat of a conversation with the WJEC – what does that involve? Would there be disciplinaries? Could a kid interpret something I said as an indication of their grade? Would I be subject to malpractice? All of these things were in the back of teachers' minds, and it led to anxiety."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

The publication of past papers and lack of unseen papers was again raised as an issue in relation to manageability. It was felt that this made assessments harder to manage because teachers were under pressure not to give away "clues" to learners.

Among interviewees who said on the survey that the process had either been quite manageable or very manageable, this was mostly due to having some kind of support. For one, having a small class size meant they had not been too burdened by the process, whereas others were given support by their centre to manage the increased workload and were given adequate training.

"It was due to our management here who had given us the training. It was arduous doing the marking. It was extra work, I suppose... It's easy to look back now and say it wasn't too bad... but it was manageable."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A few interviewees said that their centre had a system for grading which worked well, meaning that the task itself was manageable. However, the volume of work made time management difficult and most said they had worked longer hours than usual to finish their assessments.

"It depends what you mean by manageable. It was hell on earth, working hours into the night, every night, every moment of every second dealing with data. But... it was manageable, as in I had a system I could use and I felt was fair and applied consistently. But if you're on about time management it was so hard."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

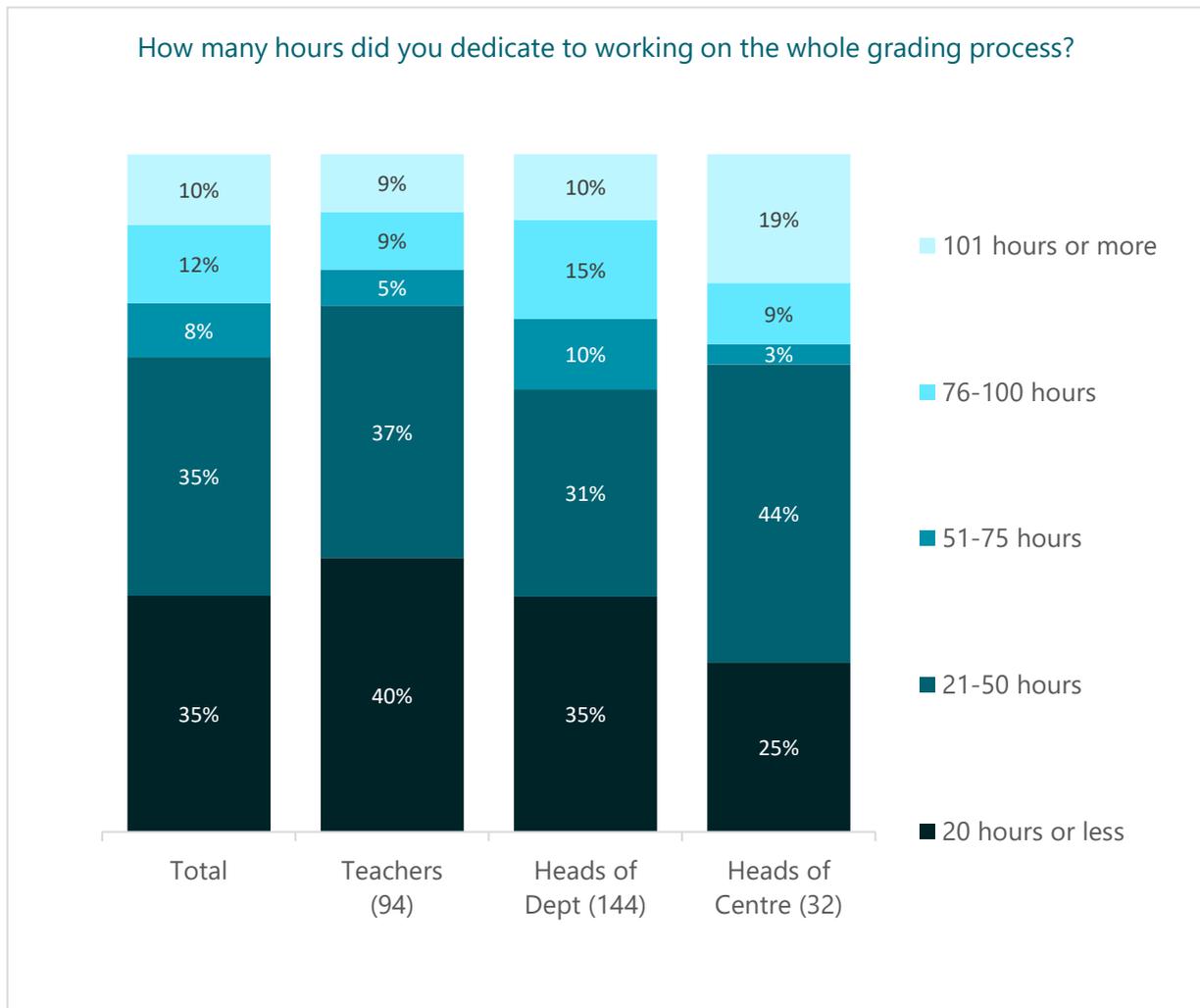
¹⁸ *"Mi nes i gael hi'n eithaf anodd gweld rhai o'm myfyrwyr dyfal yn cael cymaint o straen efo hyd at bum asesiad weithiau mewn un diwrnod, ac i bob pwrpas yn cyrraedd fy arholiad mewn dagrau. Roedd hynny'n anodd. Wrth edrych yn ôl, dylen ni fod wedi ymestyn y cyfnod asesu ychydig i'w wneud ychydig yn llai o straen i ddisgyblion."*

One interviewee, talking specifically about music, said the assessments had been more manageable than in previous years. Usually, they have to upload every piece of recorded evidence into a WJEC repository which can be time-consuming. As they were assessing internally, this was not required, which they said made the process more manageable.

3.6.2. Amount of time spent on grading

Respondents were asked to estimate how many hours they dedicated to working on the grading process in total.

Figure 22: Time dedicated to the whole grading process



Base = 287 respondents

The average number of hours that respondents spent on grading was 53. However, this masks a wide range of different experiences.

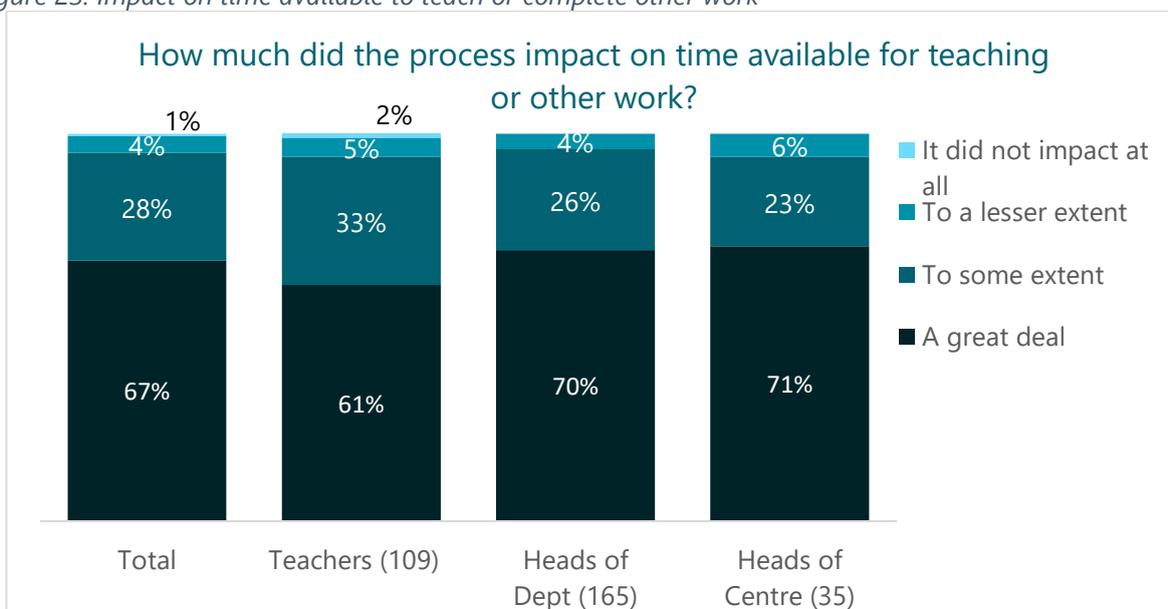
Over a third (35%) spent 20 hours or fewer involved in the grading process, however conversely nearly two thirds (65%) spent longer. At the other end of the scale, one in ten (10%) respondents dedicated more than 100 hours to the grading process. As shown in Figure 22, Heads of Centre

tended to spend more time on the grading process, relative to teachers and Heads of Department.

3.6.3. Impact on teaching time

Respondents were also asked about the impact of the grading process on the time they had available to teach and complete other tasks.

Figure 23: Impact on time available to teach or complete other work



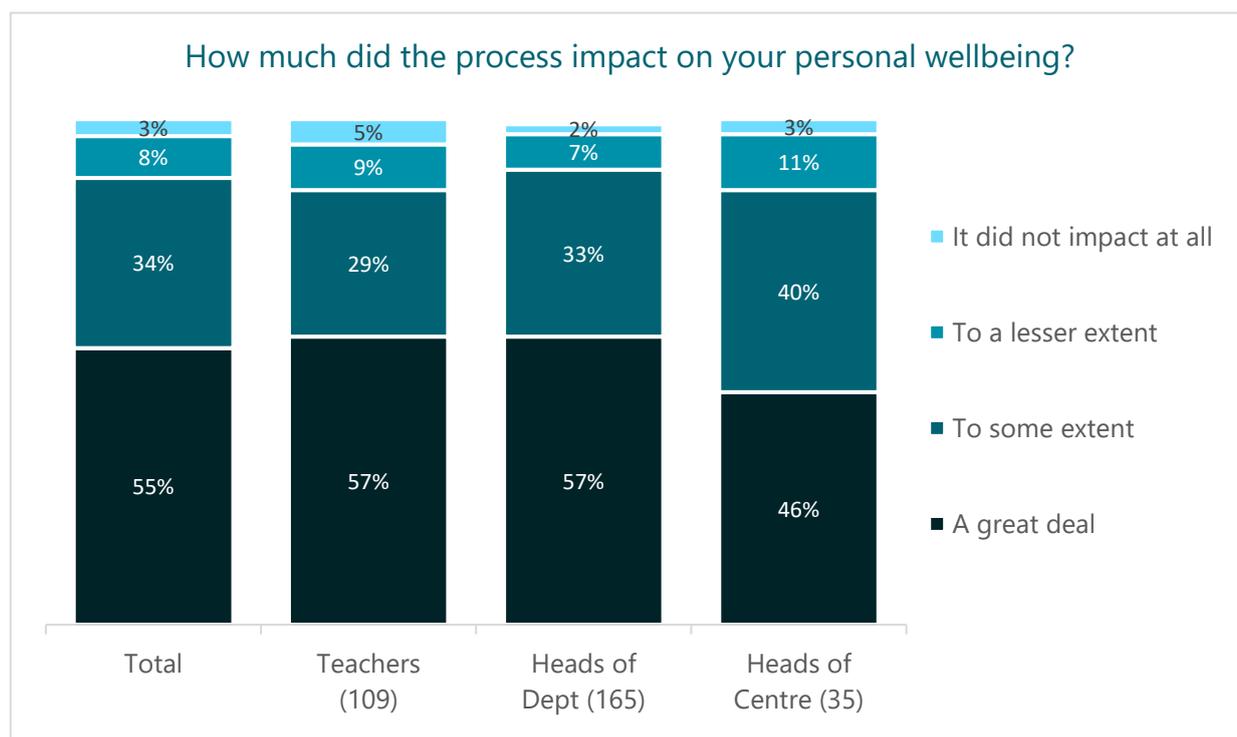
Base = 327 respondents

Over two thirds (67%) of respondents said that the process impacted 'a great deal' on other tasks. Very few considered the impact to be non-existent or minimal.

3.6.4. Impact on personal wellbeing

One question explored the impact on the personal wellbeing of those involved in the grading process.

Figure 24: To what extent did the process impact on personal wellbeing?



Base: 327 respondents

Over half (55%) of survey respondents said that the process impacted 'a great deal' on their wellbeing and a further third (34%) were impacted to some extent. Just 3% of respondents said that it did not impact at all.

Interviewees were asked to expand on their survey responses to explore the impact of the grading process on their personal wellbeing. Most said that the assessment and grading process had impacted on their personal wellbeing to at least some extent. Several factors were said to have impacted on teacher wellbeing, which included the size of the increased workload and a small window of time to complete the work. As noted already, this pressure led interviewees to working long hours outside of their normal school hours and reduced the time they were able to spend with friends and family.

This negative impact on work-life balance meant that some felt they no longer had time to exercise or even eat properly. Several interviewees talked about the toll this time took on their mental and physical health. For instance, one said that they suffered with extreme stress, sleep deprivation and weight gain.

"I found that I wasn't eating quite as healthily or creatively... Exercise went down the pan, I was sitting down quite often. The weekend as well, I was so knackered."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Some also said that the workload prevented them from properly preparing for the next school year in September.

"No time off. No time to prepare for September, because you were literally working before we broke up for the summer making sure we had all the evidence for the appeals, so if we weren't around in the summer the Exams Officer had access to it. Constantly explaining and justifying moderations, standardising, marking. You couldn't come up for air – as well as teaching and trying to prepare students in the years that were going to leave for wherever they were going. It was breathtakingly the worst year ever."

Head of Department

Also reflecting points made elsewhere, the perceived uncertainty of the quality assurance process caused anxiety for some interviewees, who were also disappointed by the lack of external verification from WJEC.

The extra time needed to dedicate to supporting learners who were anxious about the process had also been draining for some interviewees. Seeing the pressure on learners was also said by many to have negatively impacted on their wellbeing, as noted elsewhere. One interviewee explained that because everything was done virtually, a 3pm cut-off no longer existed, and some messages would arrive from learners late at night.

"You were constantly there having to support your students. Because now we've got Teams, and they're able to use the chat on Teams they would opt in sending you messages quite late in the night."

Other

Another stress mentioned by several interviewees was the pressure to 'get it right' for their learners so that nobody was unfairly disadvantaged. Several interviewees mentioned that they are teachers because they care about giving children the right opportunities and outcomes and therefore assessing them was stressful. When it is done externally it is taken out of their hands, and they can console any disappointed learners. When they hold the responsibility, there is more pressure.

"I was worried sick that I might let my children down if I didn't get the marks spot on. I wouldn't do the job if I didn't care about my kids... it impacted on me mentally because I was thinking, 'What if I haven't played fair? What if I haven't given them the exact correct grade?'"

Head of Department

One interviewee also said that they had felt pressure within the centre to maintain a certain level of average grades, which had impacted on them negatively. For those interviewees in senior roles, it had been stressful to manage and support teachers that were stressed and overstretched by the workload.

"At a senior leader level, you're worried about the teachers you are managing and leading and the impact. You could see on their faces the impact it was having on them daily, because there's nothing worse than coming in and seeing people looking beyond stressed."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

However, a small number of interviewees mentioned elements of the process that had positively impacted on their wellbeing and improved their morale or had reduced the pressure on them. The first was the support from management and colleagues within their centre. One interviewee said that the support they were given by management during the grading process and during the time where parents were questioning decisions was very positive.

"It's a great place to work. It's a good supportive place... If we had any problems, management were there to support us. We also knew that if there were going to be any complaints from parents or students then management would back us up 100%. So, we didn't feel it was all on us."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Another interviewee said that being able to give learners accurate grades that they had worked hard to earn was rewarding.

"It's just doing the job in a different way, isn't it? But, the bottom line was it was overwhelming in a positive way... Overall it was a positive experience in the end... The grades pupils had were fair... We got through it as staff and the pupils got through it as well."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.6.4.1. What would have lessened the impact on personal wellbeing?

Several ideas were given by interviewees on what could have lessened the impact of the assessment process on their personal wellbeing. Reflecting earlier feedback, the most common suggestions were that WJEC, other awarding bodies, and Qualifications Wales could have provided more support. This includes providing overarching support, clear guidance, and unseen assessment papers.

Another suggested factor that would have lessened the impact on wellbeing was being given more warning that examinations were being cancelled in favour of teacher assessment. According to some interviewees, this would have given more time to plan and complete the work without having to sacrifice so much of their personal time.

"If we could have started the process earlier. If we'd had more time... you know had we started the process in January where we could have ended it by the beginning of May, we would have had a whole month extra to spread out the workload."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Other ideas tended to be raised by individuals only. These included promoting a change in the media portrayal of teachers to improve the way they are perceived by the public. This, it was felt, would increase trust and respect in their abilities. Another interviewee felt it would have been beneficial to allow other year groups to take turns at having time out of school to focus on tasks at home, so teachers could focus on GCSE learners. However, this person recognised that this was not practical, especially given how much face-to-face teaching the learners had already lost. One interviewee said that having more staff in their department would have helped ease the workload put on individuals.

A few interviewees felt that it was difficult to say what could have been done differently because of the different approaches to grading that centres took in order to achieve the best outcomes for their learners.

"I honestly couldn't say if there is one thing. You can't say, because some schools had mocks, and some didn't. Because there's no order, or things that you should've done in the scheme of learning, there wouldn't have been a one size fits all. All schools question themselves: 'is this right for us?'"

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.6.5. Impact of conflict with learners and parents over grades awarded

Interviewees were asked whether they experienced any conflict with learners or parents over the grades that they or their centres had awarded. Most interviewees said that they experienced very little or no conflict with parents or learners. Although some said they had had many requests from parents for the evidence assessments had been based on, most said that any complaints had been dealt with before being formalised.

"We had quite a few requests – about 60-odd – for those learning decision making records, and those outlined what evidence we had used for those students... what grades they'd had in each of those and what the overall grade was. Once we'd sent those out, we only had one that came back requesting a stage two appeal."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Largely, as noted elsewhere, interviewees reported that centres had been so thorough with record keeping and evidencing decisions and had been transparent about the process, that it was difficult for anyone to question the reasoning behind grading decisions. It was also said by some interviewees that in a 'normal' year, there are parents who are unhappy with the grades awarded to their child, and the level of complaints last year were roughly comparable.

Most issues were said to be due to parents misunderstanding grading processes or criteria, or having not read the information provided to them. One interviewee also said they had not received as much feedback from parents following assessment results than they would have expected to see in other years, as they felt they were aware that the assessments were done internally and therefore felt it was not appropriate to discuss them.

Several also said that parents understood it was a difficult process and were supportive of the school and individual teachers.

"We had none at all [complaints]... we just had a really positive response from parents."

Head of Department

Those who said that they had faced some conflict said that they had not usually led to formal appeals. There were a few that had led to several meetings with parents to clarify the grades that were given. These interviewees said that these informal appeals were more likely to be based on what the parent believed their child could achieve or what a teacher had said in the past they were capable of, rather than on objective evidence from assessments.

After these discussions were held, and the parents were provided with evidence, only a small minority proceeded to formal appeals. It also provided an opportunity for parents to ask what kind of support was available to learners if they had not achieved the grades they had hoped for. Only a small number of interviewees said that these conversations had become heated.

"We had three days of discussions with parents regarding the grades. At the end of those discussions then, the pupils or parents could appeal against those grades... most of those meetings, the parents approached it in the totally correct manner. They were asking about the grades, how we arrived at the grades, what it meant. For some of them, they just wanted to chat."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

A few interviewees said that a small number of formal appeals were made following discussions with parents. In one case, a teacher reported having had some of their grades changed following

appeal. They said that they felt disappointed by this, because they felt their assessment framework was fair and effective.

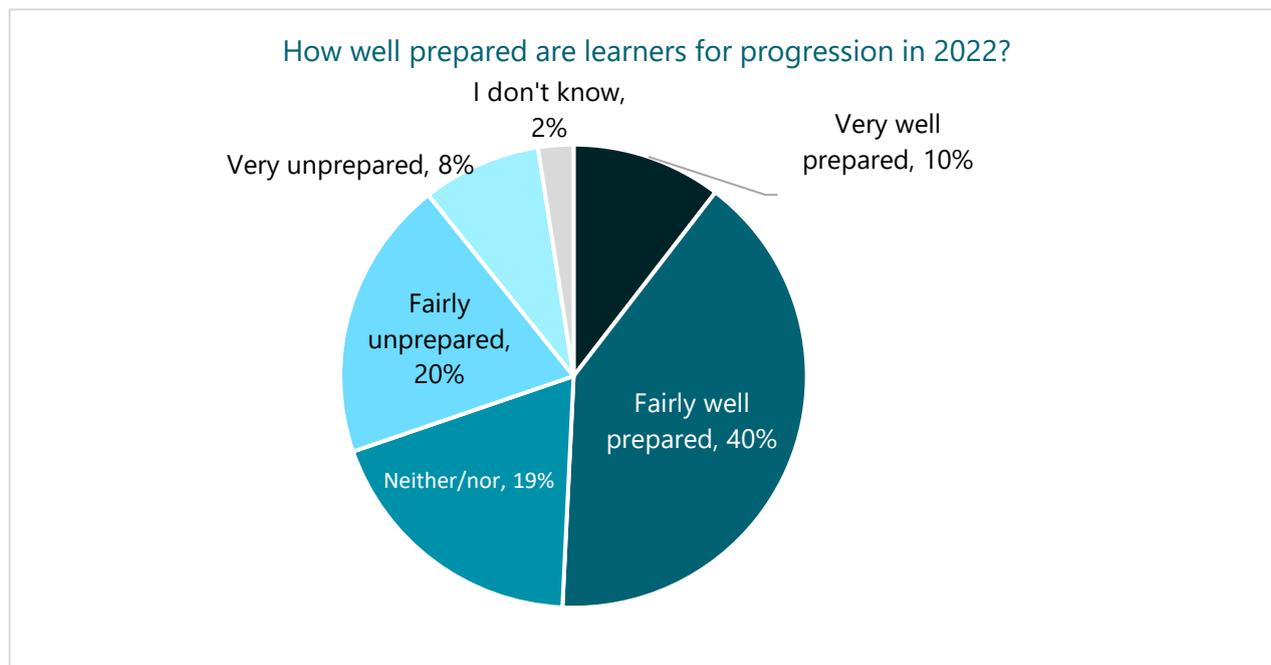
"In our system, that should never have happened, because there is something fundamentally gone wrong there."

Exams Officer / Manager

3.6.6. Impact on learners' progression

Survey respondents were asked how well prepared learners were for progression on to employment/further learning in 2022.

Figure 25: How well prepared are learners for progression to employment/further learning in 2022?



Base = 327 respondents

Over half (51%) of respondents thought that learners were either very or fairly well prepared for progression next year. Around a fifth (19%) of respondents gave a neutral response, and just over a quarter (28%) anticipated that learners would be unprepared for progression next year.

Interviewees were asked to expand on their survey responses regarding how prepared they felt learners were for progression to employment or further education in 2022. Most interviewees felt that learners were either very well or fairly prepared, with slightly more saying they were fairly well prepared than very well prepared.

As teachers were assessing the learners, a few felt that they were able to target learning on what would be important for them to know and the skills they needed to progress. One said that they were also able to use the time after assessments were complete to organise progression courses to further prepare learners for their next steps.

"When we were making these early decisions on what we'd assess; the mantra always was 'what must they know?'. If that child is leaving school at 16 and going into an apprenticeship in English, in Maths, what must they be able to do? Let's assess that, because the guidance gave us the freedom to make those sorts of sensible decisions."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Some also felt that doing a series of assessments was more representative of employment than sitting formal exams would be. It was also felt that this way of learning was more similar to what they would do in university, where a series of tasks are set and different deadlines given, with the learner managing their time to complete them.

"In the real world, how many of them are going to sit in a ruddy great big hall with 200 other children at desks in silence? I don't think that gets them ready for the real world, the actual doing the work, getting to the deadlines, submitting the work under extenuating circumstances such as we've had in the last two years. I think they're more prepared now for what can be thrown at them than if they hadn't had that."

Head of Department

However, a few interviewees said that they felt learners were prepared to progress to further learning or employment, although not to the same extent as they would have been in previous years. This was largely due to having less contact time with teachers and covering fewer subjects than they would have if revising for formal examinations. This was evident to one teacher as the learners started Year 12 and had to spend time learning topics which would have been covered at GCSE in the past.

The loss of contact time also meant that learners had lost out on practical skills required for some university degrees and one interviewee felt that missing out on exams may put some learners at a disadvantage when they arrive at university. However, they hoped that the universities will come to expect this.

"For university I felt like I'd prepared them the best I could but then we'd had two years of no practicals in science because of COVID. So, I send the students off to do a practical at university and they don't even know what a Bunsen burner is... Hopefully universities will know that the students will be weaker coming in."

Head of Department

Conversely, another interviewee felt that the practical nature of the course they teach will prepare learners well for the workplace. The fact that teachers were not preparing learners for formal examinations in the same way allowed them to maximise the practical elements and the skills developed.

"With my subject there's a lot of skill-based aspects to it, so you have the technical, creative and analytical skills and teamwork, problem solving... That is very transferrable into the workplace... They pitch ideas, they're used to presenting, all those sorts of stuff that I felt does prepare them... and then we used to do essay writing, so communication skills are very important."

Other

One interviewee felt it important to note that the 2021 cohort had been better prepared than the 2020 cohort, who effectively ended their education in March.

Of the few interviewees who felt learners were unprepared to progress to further learning or employment, it was mainly due to the impact of the pandemic on their learning. Having had two years of disrupted learning, teachers were concerned that learners may struggle with the demands of university.

"The reality is they missed nearly three quarters of a year of their schooling, and I think that some of them got into a certain mode of working or not working and so they weren't prepared to go on to university."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

A few interviewees were also concerned about the impact of the loss of schooling during the lockdowns on the mental health of learners, which in turn has impacted how prepared they are to take their next steps. In addition, they felt the fact they could not cover all the topics they normally would have caused learners to worry about how prepared they are for university or work.

One interviewee stated that although there has been an impact on the wellbeing and mental health of young people, blame cannot be apportioned to the education system. Rather, it is a symptom of having lived through a challenging time where changes to the education system had to happen.

"It's that interaction with people, and they missed out on that. So, I'm not sure it's this process so much that's unprepared them, I think it's more life in general and the experience of the COVID year, I wouldn't put that on Qualifications Wales or WJEC or us as a school. I think that was wider than that."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Others were undecided because the lockdowns would have helped some learners improve their ability to work independently, preparing them for university, while others still struggle with this. It was felt that the extent to which a learner will be prepared to progress also depends on the subjects they have studied as some work better for distance learning than others.

One interviewee said that in preparing for careers, learners will have missed out on having outside speakers and mock career interviews and those progressing to university do not have experience of sitting exams yet.

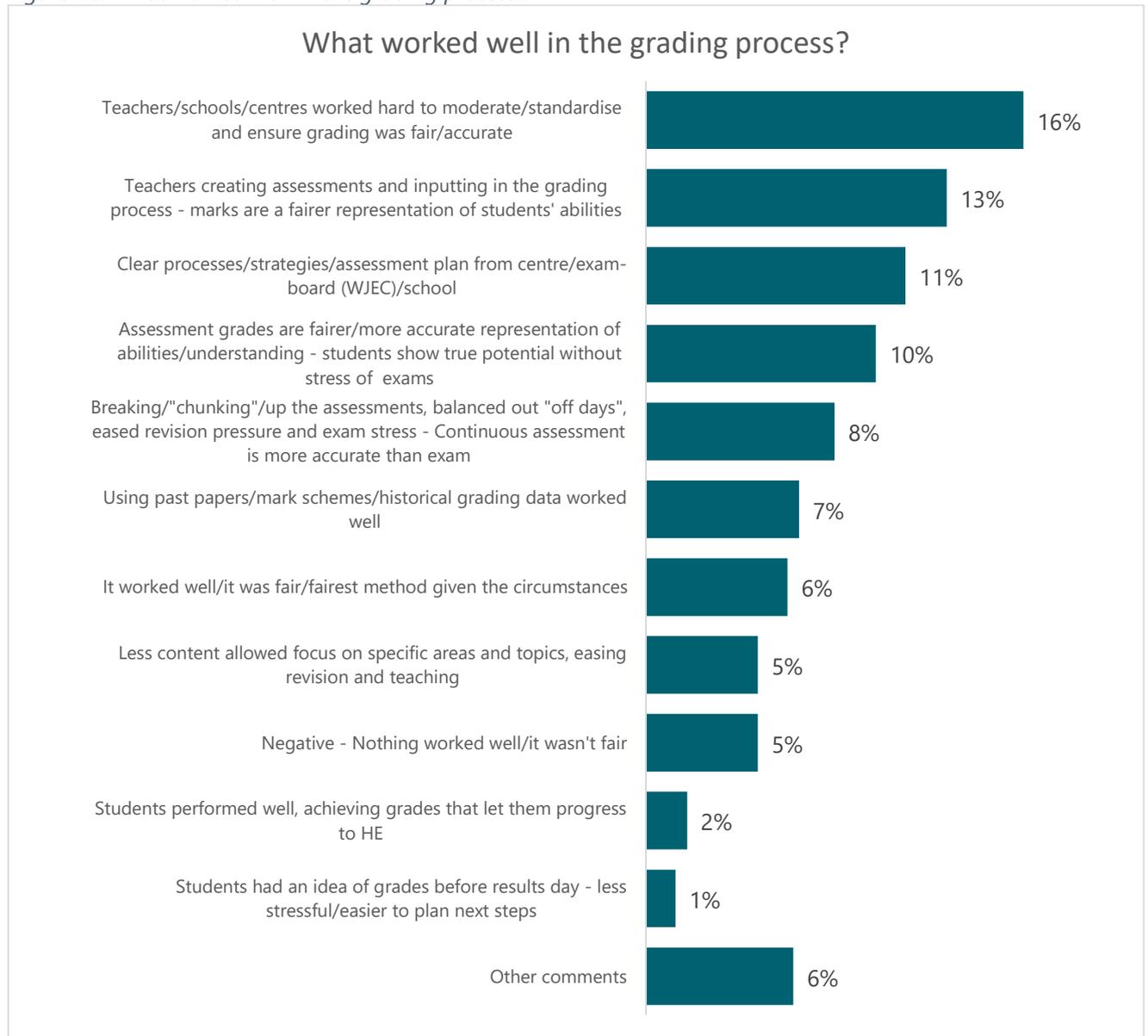
3.7. Overall views on the grading process

3.7.1. What worked well?

Survey respondents were given an opportunity to say in their own words what went well about the 2021 grading process.

A third (34%) did not answer this question and the remaining answers have been reviewed with the key themes shown in Figure 26.

Figure 26: What worked well in the grading process?



Base = 395 respondents

Sixteen per cent felt that 'teachers/schools/centres worked hard to moderate and standardise grades to ensure that grading was fair and accurate'. Comments made by respondents reflecting this tended to refer to the rigour of moderation and standardisation processes.

"As a school, a lot of thought went into the process to make sure that the procedure was robust. All members of staff were involved in the process for grading as it helped to have staff who did not teach the pupils to be impartial in decision making and ensure fairness."

Head of Department

Some other comments made by respondents in relation to this point also reflected the collaborative elements of the grading process.

"I think assessing pupils in the way we did as a school was a robust and fair system. All learners were given the opportunity to show what they were capable of. The process ensured no bias was had and work was moderated both within school and with [other] centres."

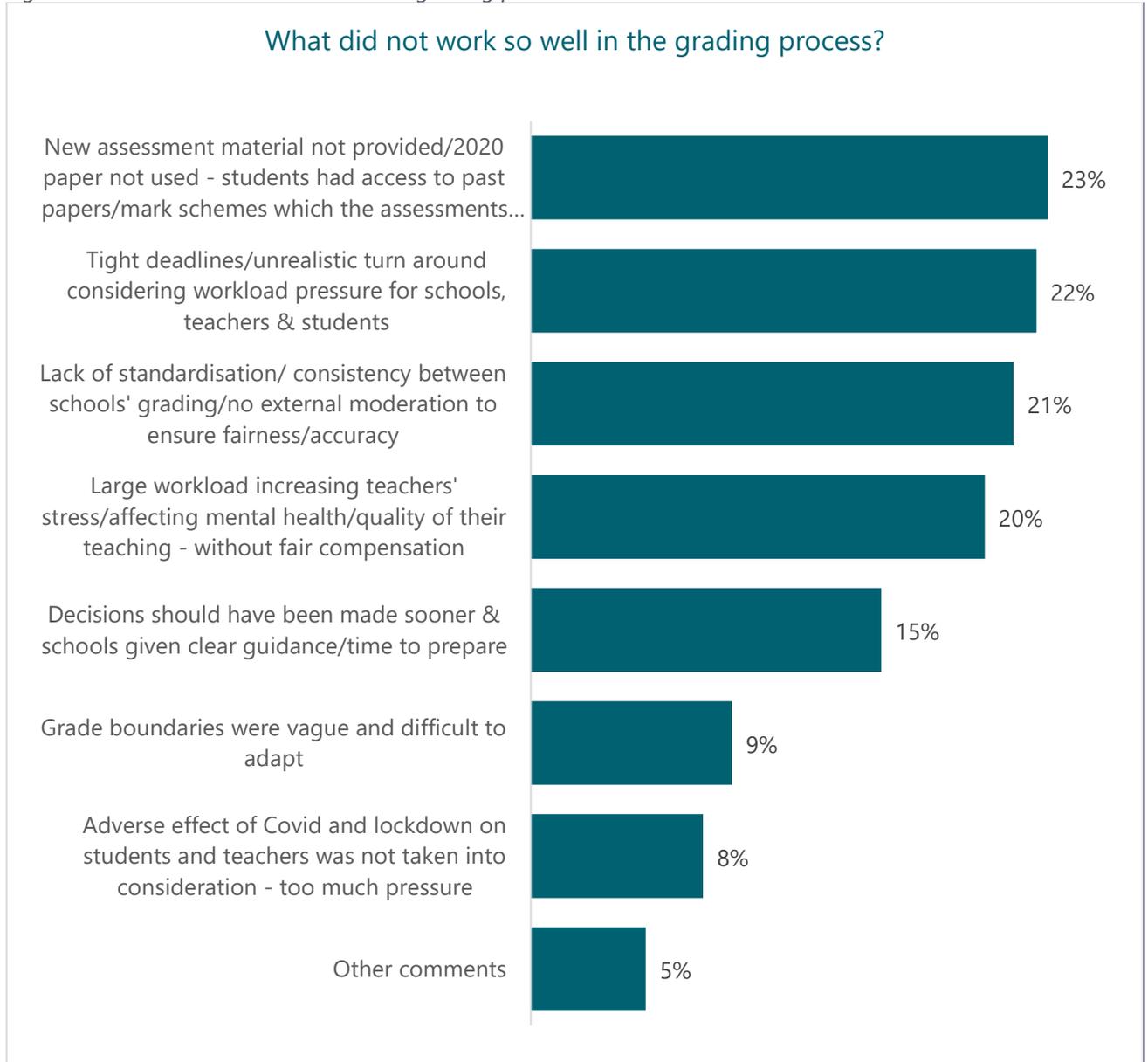
Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

One in five commented that teachers creating assessments and inputting into the grading process resulted in marks being a fairer reflection of student abilities.

3.7.2. What worked less well?

Respondents were also asked what worked less well about the 2021 grading process. As with 'what worked well', around a third (32%) did not provide an answer to what worked less well.

Figure 27: What did not work well in the grading process?



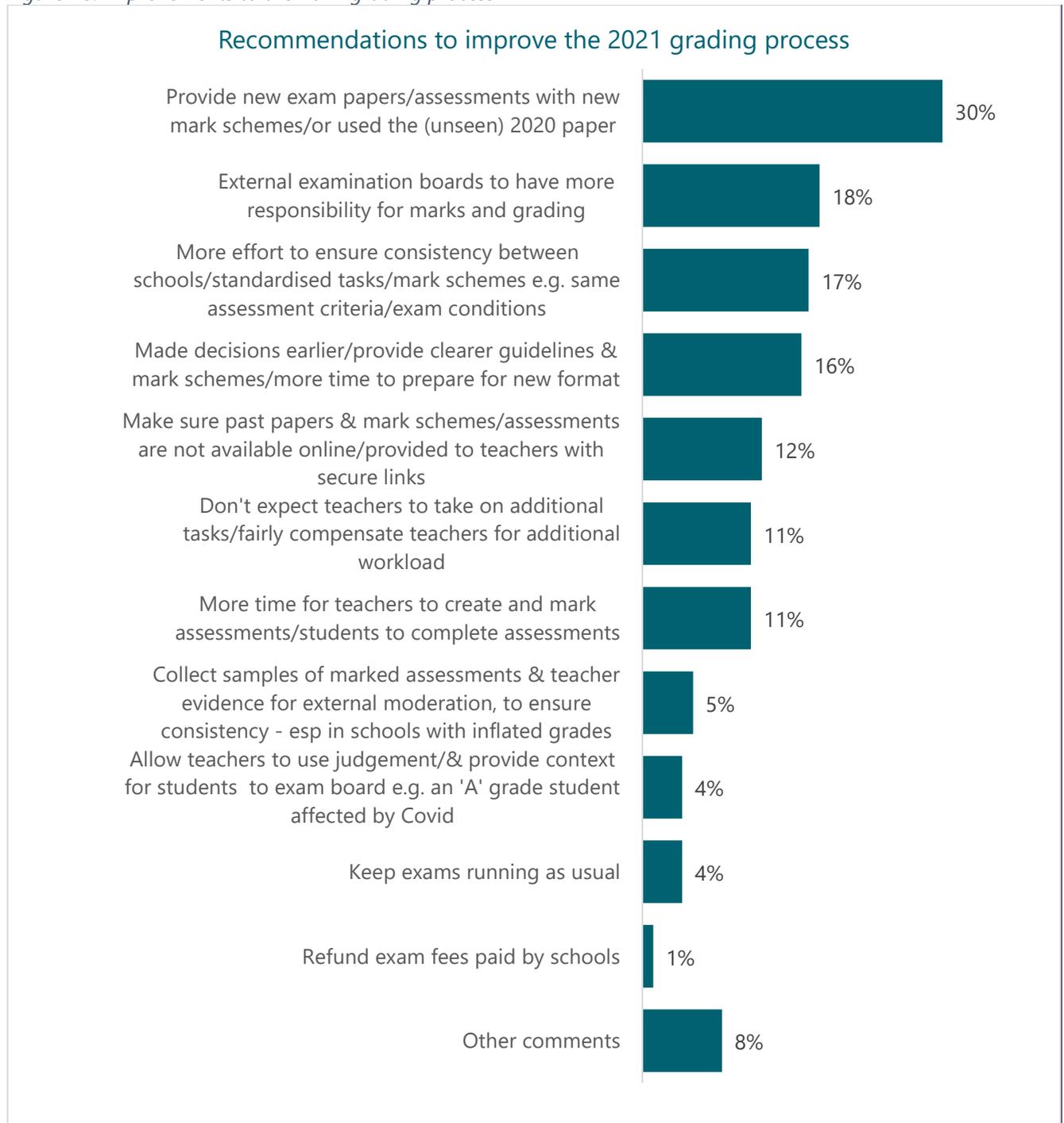
Base = 395 respondents

Four key themes were identified, all of which have been raised in relation to other questions: new assessment material was not provided; tight deadlines; lack of standardisation and external moderation and the impact of the workload on teachers' wellbeing and ability to teach effectively.

3.7.3. Potential improvements

Respondents were asked what one recommendation they would make that would have improved the 2021 grading process. Their answers are shown in Figure 28.

Figure 28: Improvements to the 2021 grading process



Base = 276 respondents

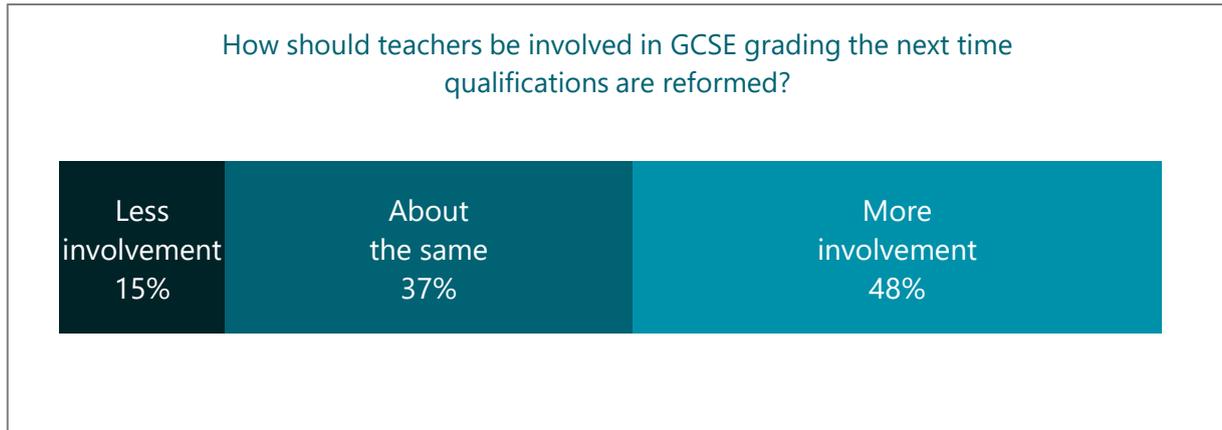
The most frequent suggestion was to 'provide new, unseen exams/assessments', reflecting a recurring theme from the survey and interview responses. Many of the comments reflect other issues raised elsewhere around timelines, external moderation, and workload.

3.8. Looking ahead

3.8.1. Views on future involvement with GCSE grading

Having been through the very different experience of 2021, it seemed appropriate for our survey to ask how teachers might be involved in GCSE grading when qualifications are next reformed. Discussions around the pros and cons of teacher assessment are a regular part of such reforms and 2021 has provided some insight into the potential options.

Figure 29: How should teachers be involved in GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed?



Base = 313 respondents

Nearly half (48%) of survey respondents felt that teachers should have more involvement with GCSE grading relative to before the pandemic, whilst around one in seven (15%) respondents thought that they should have less involvement than before the pandemic. Just over a third (37%) stated that they would like to see the level of involvement returned to the way it was before the pandemic.

3.8.1.1. What would more involvement with GCSE grading look like?

Interviewees were asked to expand on their survey responses to explain why they said that they would like more, less, or about the same involvement with GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed. Interviewees who said that they would like more involvement were then asked what they would like this to look like.

Several interviewees who said that they would like more involvement said that they would like teacher assessments to account for a greater proportion of overall grades to provide what they felt would be a fairer and more accurate assessment of learners' overall ability than exams. This was because exams can be affected by anxiety, illness, or personal circumstances; rely on memory; and only reflect learners' performance on one day, it was said.

"Because of exam anxiety, they can flunk an exam... The number of times on GCSE results day you look at the results and think, 'Oh no, that's not right. They're better than that'... it would be nice if they actually allowed – whether it be 50% teacher grade and 50% the external exams so they've got that mixture... but I do think as teachers we do know them, and it would be nice if our professional judgement was considered."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

One interviewee who advocated this approach pointed out that it may also increase learner engagement in class, because learners would know that their class work may potentially count towards their overall grades.

Other interviewees who felt that teacher assessments should account for a greater proportion of grades suggested that this could be achieved through awarding bodies setting a limited choice of assessments to be completed in class, under strict, consistent conditions, and then externally marked. These interviewees felt that this approach would be fairer and less stressful for learners and more manageable for teachers than the 2021 grading arrangements.

"That way, it's much better standardised all over because everybody who's taking that qualification in Wales is doing the same thing. You've got properly trained assessors who are looking at the work. And, it takes the pressure off us as teachers because we're not having to do all of this extra work."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Alternatively, another interviewee said that coursework should form a greater proportion of overall grades but suggested that centres should have more choice about how their learners are assessed. This would help to ensure that centres adopted an approach to grading which was manageable for learners and teachers.

"The exam would still remain at the end but maybe the percentage would be less for it, so you have to weigh up whether you do more assessments with kids or whether you get the data from assessments you would have done anyway... You can't have a uniform approach because different kids need different things, different schools require different things... But as long as there was some guidance in terms of marking and how workload should be managed for schools, I think that in itself would be an interesting conversation."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

A different interviewee felt that teachers should have greater input into GCSE grading through there being greater parity between GCSE qualifications in the proportions of NEA and exams they contain. They explained that, currently, qualifications such as languages were heavily exam-focused. They said that this put learners off studying them, relative to other qualifications with higher NEA and lower exam proportions. This was also said to result in unfair outcomes for learners who struggled with exams.

*"I think that there's no real parity between subjects the way that GCSEs are at the moment. Now, in languages, everything is exam-based. The speaking is NEA, but it's an exam to all intents and purposes. And yet, in other subjects there are still strong elements... of controlled assessments and coursework. If you think that across the subjects, the GCSE exams are fair... I'm able to look at the actual grades of the pupils, and there are children getting Us in an exam and A*s in a coursework and coming out with a B or a C. That, to me, is entirely unfair."*

Head of Department

It was also suggested that class-based assessments should be shorter and *"snappier"* than they were currently to greater reflect the kinds of assessments that would be used in further and higher education and in employment, and better bridge the gap between GCSE and AS and A level.

"My own opinion is as you move forward to the new curriculum, make the assessments that they take in school reflect the nature of their future learning or their future employment."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

3.8.1.2. Involvement in the wider grading process

Interviewees who said that they would welcome more involvement with grading the next time qualifications are reformed were also asked whether they would like to be involved in the wider grading process, for example working with or assisting WJEC. Slightly more of those who were asked this additional question disagreed than agreed with it.

Some of those who said they would not like more involvement in the wider grading process reflected on the difficulty and manageability of the 2021 grading process. Reflecting points made elsewhere, the 2021 grading was stressful and caused additional work for teachers for which they were not compensated, it was said.

Another interviewee who said that they would not like more involvement in the wider grading process emphasised that an exam-led system was fairer than one which incorporated a greater proportion of teacher assessment.

"I'm quite happy with an exam system. I think it's fair and equitable. I understand that a lot of people say they want teacher assessment models and getting this holistic grade on a student. I get that, but that is incredibly difficult to standardise and moderate... It hasn't been a level playing field, and anybody that looks at the data would know that. The improvements that we saw in teacher assessment level weren't mirrored or anything else so clearly it isn't a perfect tool."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Conversely, a few other interviewees who said that they would not like to be involved with the wider grading process emphasised that the current exam system was outdated and unfair to most learners. Echoing points made elsewhere in this report, they suggested that GCSEs should examine skills that learners need in work and in life in a more varied and accessible way.

"What I think this pandemic has shown is that our examination system is archaic and needs reforming... Perhaps we need a situation where there are fewer exams, but those assessments are more holistic involving coursework, verbal assessment and written assessments.... We need a great variety of assessment methods to get the best out of each pupil individually fully."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Again, reflecting points already made in this report, another interviewee said that they would not welcome more involvement in the wider grading process because they felt that a "hybrid" system combining course work with exams would be fairer for learners, especially those in difficult circumstances who would struggle with exams.

"I feel like this hybrid system is a good way because at least then I can say, 'yes, in the exam they didn't do very well', but when they're sat with me doing normal rigour for that one year... that was quite manageable. As it goes by, you'd be able to perfect that routine you need to get into... And you can give that context and you can give that kid that boost. You can say 'right, in the writing we're going to nail it. We're going to nail it in lesson, then you've got banked that good grade. Then everything else, if you don't do so well... don't worry about it.'"

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.8.1.3. Why do some teachers want less involvement with GCSE grading in future?

Most of the interviewees who said they would like less input into grading decisions the next time qualifications were reformed did so largely because they felt it was fairer for learners when teachers did not have this level of involvement as in CDGs. In one case, this was said to be due to “*unscrupulous*” teachers and schools deliberately inflating grades, but in another, unconscious bias was said to play a role.

The same interviewee also noted that their experiences of the summer 2021 grading had discouraged them from having any further involvement with grading in future. What they saw as poor and slow communication from WJEC and Qualifications Wales about changes to the process had added stress at an already difficult time, it was said.

"There were a huge number of things that changed throughout the process last year and... centres had to be on the lookout for them... There's stuff that they've been putting onto their secure website but we're only finding out when our Exams Officer happens to look on there... it just creates such a huge stress, so I don't mind being far away from the grading process, but I want to be able to get my kids the best grades possible. Better communications from Qualifications Wales or WJEC on how we do that is key."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

The additional workload that would be created by having more involvement in the grading process the next time qualifications are reformed would discourage another interviewee from getting involved with it, they noted.

"I would certainly try my best not to be involved again.... The quality assurance hasn't necessarily been improved in all centres. I think the only way that can be improved is if you sit down with an examiner. What's the point in standardising if you're not all meeting the same standards?... It's quite scary. If you were to standardise to the degree we did as a school for all those tests we did at GCSE and A level, that's an undoable job. We have full timetables, and we rarely see each other at lunch times never mind sit down and go over a paper."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Of the two interviewees who said that they were unsure about whether they would like more involvement in grading the next time qualifications are reformed, one said that they preferred the summer 2021 approach to grading over the usual approach because it encouraged teachers to adopt a fair and rigorous approach. The other felt that centres and teachers should have more choice in how learners were graded, but that the detail of this needed careful consideration to ensure fairness and consistency whilst avoiding creating workload issues for teachers.

3.8.2. Views on future teacher assessment

Interviewees were asked how they would like to see teacher assessment used in future, and what they thought future quality assurance processes of teacher assessment should look like.

3.8.2.1. How should teacher assessment be used in future?

Most interviewees stated that they would like to see a more equal balance of teacher assessment and exams in future. As noted elsewhere, some felt that the current system relied too heavily on exams and did not capture or harness the skills which learners would subsequently require in work and life.

One interviewee stated that teachers should be able to review grades before they are shared with learners to ensure that the impact of any extenuating circumstances had been considered. This interviewee also recognised that this approach would be challenging to implement, given the numbers of centres and learners.

"Could we meet with the exam boards when the grades come back rather than us just finding out on results day? It would be good to review [grades] before the results are announced to students so that any extenuating circumstances are conveyed to the exam board and dealt with then... I feel that students' lives just aren't taken into account. They're just a number in the system and it would be nice for teachers to take some of that back and be able to stand by our students and say the student does deserve this grade."

Head of Department

Some interviewees were in favour of more collaborative moderation and external verification processes. One interviewee felt that in-centre moderation of NEA worked better for some subjects than others.

"I think it depends on the subject... I'm happy that we assess all the practical exams. With any examiner that comes, sometimes we don't agree. It sometimes depends to some degree on whether they like a piece. Sometimes they write and write, and they aren't even looking at the students. One year, we got an examiner that we felt was [sitting too] far away. That was for A level and that can affect college choices."¹⁹

Head of Department

However, there was some feeling that teacher assessment should be kept to a minimum, and that a largely exam-based system was best. This was mainly due to inconsistent practice in teacher assessment between schools, which had led to grades being inflated, as discussed elsewhere.

Accordingly, some interviewees noted that if teacher assessment was to be used to a greater extent going forward, greater control would be needed to ensure that assessments were based on learners' own work.

Other supporters of a largely exam-based system felt that certain subjects, especially maths, did not lend themselves particularly well to teacher assessment.

¹⁹ "Rwy'n credu fod e'n dibynnu ar y pwnc... dw i'n hapus bod ni'n asesu'r holl arholiadau ymarferol. Gydag unrhyw arholwr sy'n dod, weithiau dydyn ni ddim yn cytuno. Mae'n dibynnu i ryw raddau weithiau os maen nhw'n hoffi darn. Weithiau maen nhw'n ysgrifennu ac yn ysgrifennu, a maen nhw ddim hyd yn oed yn edrych ar y plentyn. Un flwyddyn, cafon ni arholwr oedden ni'n teimlo ym mhell i ffwrdd. Roedd hynny ar gyfer Lefel A ac mae hynny'n gallu effeithio ar ddewisiadau'r coleg."

"I don't think we need teacher involvement in assessment in mathematics personally... When I was at school... I didn't feel the coursework enhanced my learning. I felt it was forced into my learning rather than actually helping me, so I wouldn't want to put that on kids moving forward."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

3.8.2.2. What should future quality assurance of teacher assessment look like?

Interviewees expressed a range of views on what they thought future quality assurance processes of teacher assessment should look like.

A few interviewees stated that they were happy with the approach to teacher assessment that had been implemented in summer 2021 and would like it to continue. Elements of the 2021 approach that were favoured by these interviewees included the internal standardisation and robust data collection. Several felt that awarding bodies should send examiners out to check learners' work and advise centre staff on the appropriateness and consistency of their assessment approach.

"Well, I think that's where we could have... the WJEC coming out to see our work and seeing what we do, looking at our evidence and almost approving the centre. There's a sense that your grades are within tolerance, and you can carry on, and if not, you get extra support from them. But I think a bit more consistency across the schools and to know that consistency is there would be positive."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Teacher assessment should be done collaboratively within centres and then samples of work should be sent off for external marking to ensure quality and consistency in marking across and within centres, others noted.

There was some feeling that implementing this approach could help to raise standards of teaching and learning in schools more widely, which some interviewees attributed to the greater likelihood of scrutiny that their assessments would be subject to, relative to processes that had been in place in the past.

"The process they did have with the sampling; I've been at this school now for eight years and there was always the threat of [the awarding body] coming in to check processes... I never saw it in eight years, so I do think it needs to be that bit more robust because there are possibly a few schools getting away with quite a lot."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

A few interviewees said that having clear grading standards would be key to ensuring consistent teacher assessment in future. Some of those who advocated a similar model acknowledged the extra time that this kind of approach would take.

Reflecting comments made elsewhere, some felt that quality assurance of teacher assessment should vary by subject to acknowledge the different proportions of NEA within different qualifications.

Training and guidance for centre staff was also seen to be important going forward to ensure that all staff understand their responsibilities and take a consistent approach to teacher assessment. In addition, as noted elsewhere, there was some feeling that staff should be paid fairly for any additional time spent on teacher assessment.

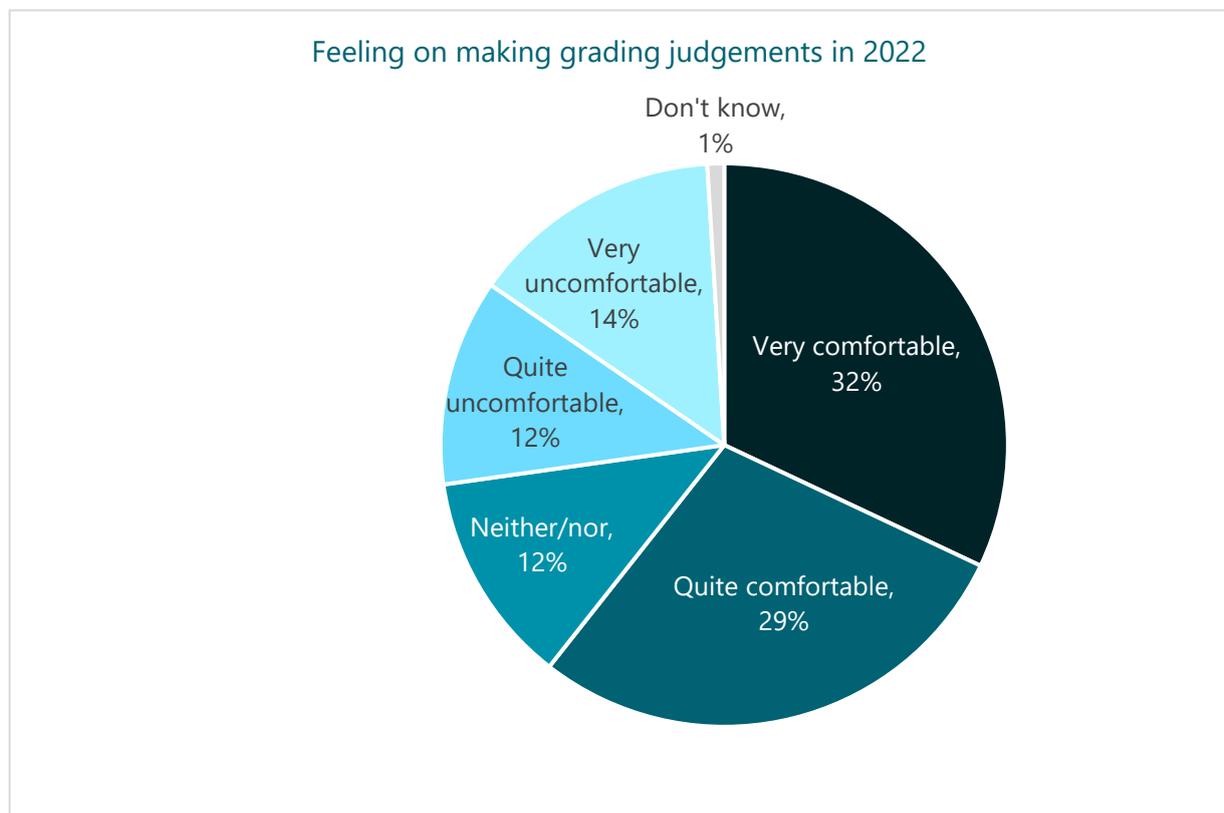
"As long as teachers are remunerated properly, that's fine. I think you've got to do something with them [markers] and whether they become coursework moderators externally or the job title of a moderator or a team leader or chief examiner or whatever changes slightly to incorporate that, then it's fine... it's about giving teachers time and resources and if not uniform policy, uniform guidance on what should be expected for marking, for teachers' time"

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

3.8.3. Views on 2022 assessment arrangements

Respondents were asked to what extent they would feel comfortable about making grading judgements for qualifications awarded in 2022, if it became necessary to cancel examinations again.

Figure 30: Level of comfort in making grading judgements for qualifications in 2022



Base = 312 respondents

Around three in five (61%) of respondents would feel 'very' or 'quite' comfortable about making grading judgements. However, a substantial minority (26%) would be uncomfortable at having to repeat the exercise.

Interviewees were asked how confident they were in the planned adaptations to the assessment arrangements for 2022, and about what challenges they can foresee arising when the 2022 assessment arrangements are implemented.

3.8.3.1. Confidence in the 2022 assessment arrangements

Most interviewees who said that they felt fairly confident in the planned adaptations to the assessment arrangements did so because having information on the planned adaptations early on has enabled their centre to plan ahead. A few interviewees who expressed this opinion also felt that removing some of the content that learners could potentially be assessed on would help to make grading more manageable for staff.

"I know [the specifications] backwards now. I feel it's really helped us. Our A level cohort are flying through... I think I'm going to finish my content before next half term... because I've lost no learning time... the adaptations have really helped and having more content removed this year was a wise decision... Last year we were really struggling for time."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

One interviewee, who felt that knowing about the planned adaptations early is helpful, pointed out that the content that could be assessed had been reduced for some qualifications but not for others.

"For most subjects, I think the adaptations and specifications have been very good. But, certain subjects I'm not so sure about because they haven't really reduced the amount that needs to be taught in the time spent."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Several interviewees felt that returning to exams was unfair due to learner anxiety and teacher absence.

"If we were going to go back to our old system, I don't think that's fair because there are so many more anxious and stressed kids, and teachers are away, so different groups have had different experiences... We're going into a situation where we've got mocks in January, but we've still got contingency plans. So these kids now are sitting mocks but the mocks don't count for anything."

Head of Department

Some expressed that, although they were fully prepared if a decision was made to return to a CDG approach in 2022, they would not welcome this.

"I'm confident that if we go to a similar situation that we had this summer, that we will cope with it and we will do it because that's what teachers do. Would I like it? No. But I think we've got our bases covered again. We've already altered the way that we're doing our mock exams."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Others welcomed the fact that all schools would be required to take the same approach to assessment in 2022, regardless of its specifics, because this increased fairness for learners.

One interviewee felt that exams should be broken down into smaller assessments to be taken throughout the year to reduce pressure on learners. However, they also acknowledged that this could impact on teachers' workloads.

3.8.3.2. Challenges facing the 2022 assessment arrangements

Interviewees foresaw the following challenges arising when the 2022 assessment arrangements are implemented.

- Lack of certainty over assessment arrangements, materials, and quality assurance.

The main challenge anticipated by interviewees was the perceived lack of certainty over the 2022 assessment arrangements, materials, and quality assurance processes. Some expressed concerns that the 2022 arrangements would be finalised or change at short notice, adding to centres' stress and workload.

One interviewee pointed out that the uncertain assessment arrangements affected vocational qualifications more than academic qualifications.

"I would plead that vocational subjects outside of Welsh Bacc be as organised as Welsh Bacc because the communication is so delayed... Somebody's got to have a meeting, make a decision and move forward. This can't be going on months... without having information about how vocational qualifications will be assessed. We're only just getting back to a point where we can continue, and we can carry out safe practicals. Even now they're modified, because obviously sharing of tools and equipment we're still trying to keep that down to a minimum."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Interviewees urged decision makers and awarding bodies to specify exactly what the 2022 arrangements would be in good time to allow centres to prepare themselves and their learners and allow awarding bodies to deliver training and implement quality assurance processes, it was said.

"Tell us now that we're going to centre determined grades... We'd have a longer time to prepare, we've learnt the lessons from last year. It would give the exam board time to build in quality assurance process. They could be doing some subject-specific standardisation and training and support over a period of months. That would bring us a more robust set of data for next summer."

Head of Department

Other interviewees explained that they were trying to mitigate against the lack of certainty over the assessment arrangements by preparing learners for the "contingency plan".

"The school is going to make sure there is existing data that can prove these students are the grade the data says they are... Normally there would be no pressure on us. It would be prepare the mocks, deliver the mocks, and grade them how you always would. This year, I can already feel that process starting to find its way into the preparation for the mocks. It's already make sure you agree the paper, make sure the students are prepared and they have detailed revision lists. We're already looking at having to make sure the papers have the coverage, and they are bang on the marks of the exam. We aren't ready for that yet."

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

Should a decision be made to return to a CDG model, WJEC should also support centres' preparation by providing examples of unseen exam papers in good time, it was said, in line with feedback expressed throughout this report.

- Disruption caused by COVID-19-related staff and learner absences.

Staff and learner absences due to COVID-19 was said to have caused severe disruption to teaching and learning in 2021. As noted elsewhere, this meant that many learners had no experience of formal exams, were suffering with mental health issues, and were performing more poorly than they were before the pandemic. There was some worry among interviewees that

COVID-19 could again disrupt learning in 2022, which would make exam-based assessment difficult and unfair for learners.

"Honestly, I think it's bonkers that we're doing exams this summer... So, in the same way you can't adopt a uniform policy, there is no uniform way that teachers and pupils will contract coronavirus in the next year... The time disruption still exists: the problem still exists because the virus hasn't gone away. For instance, there are a few of my Year 11 who are really struggling with attendance at the moment because of COVID and how they respond to that emotionally. So, when they haven't had that formalised exam experience in Year 10 ... It's unfair"

Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer

In some centres, high staff absences had made it very difficult to hold mock exams. A requirement to proceed with exams in 2022 could mean that these centres are faced with similar issues, it was said.

"A lot of staff have been very ill this year because of Covid... We have trouble finding staff to cover. We've set mock exams for Year 11 and Year 13 before Christmas, where they have exams in the hall, formally. We couldn't find anyone to be there... If we can't do that, we need to do them during lessons, and the pupils won't get that experience."²⁰

Head of Department

To mitigate against the disruption caused by COVID-19, one interviewee explained that they had been conducting timed mock assessments in class in order to prepare learners for the possibility of sitting exams in 2022.

"I think they're going to have a high level of anxiety going into those halls, to be honest. The way we're trying to mitigate it is getting students used to sitting regular assessments, timed assessments in class. Even if it's with their notes. ...sitting quiet for an hour is something for them to get used to."

Other

Another interviewee suggested that the disruption to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic should be taken into consideration when awarding grades in 2022.

"Assuming exams go ahead as normal... what I'd love to see is that the challenges of teaching through COVID is taken into account through sensible grading. I think that's the best we can all hope for."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Department

Some interviewees suggested that this challenge could be mitigated against by implementing assessment approaches that take prior learning into account rather than being based on learners' current attainment alone.

²⁰ *"Mae llawer o'r staff wedi bod yn sâl iawn eleni oherwydd Covid... Mae'n anodd dod o hyd i staff i gyflenwi. 'Dan ni wedi gosod ffug arholiadau ar gyfer Blwyddyn 11 a Blwyddyn 13 cyn 'Dolig, lle mae ganddyn nhw arholiadau yn y neuadd, yn ffurfiol. Doedden ni ddim yn gallu dod o hyd i unrhyw un i fod yno... Os na allwn ni wneud hynny, mae angen i ni eu gwneud yn ystod gwersi, a fydd y disgyblion ddim yn cael y profiad hwnnw."*

"If we could have an underlying safety net approach... I'm not exactly sure how that would work [but] a minimum grade for a pupil might be the way and then those grades are collated and the WJEC or Qualifications Wales look at them and see how they look at previous years as well."

Deputy / Assistant Head of Centre

Another interviewee suggested that learners who were isolating could complete assessments on Teams under conditions which were as strict as possible.

"If there are children that cannot attend because they're isolating, can we get those children to be like this on Teams watching [others] doing their paper... so I can see they're not cheating?"

Head of Department

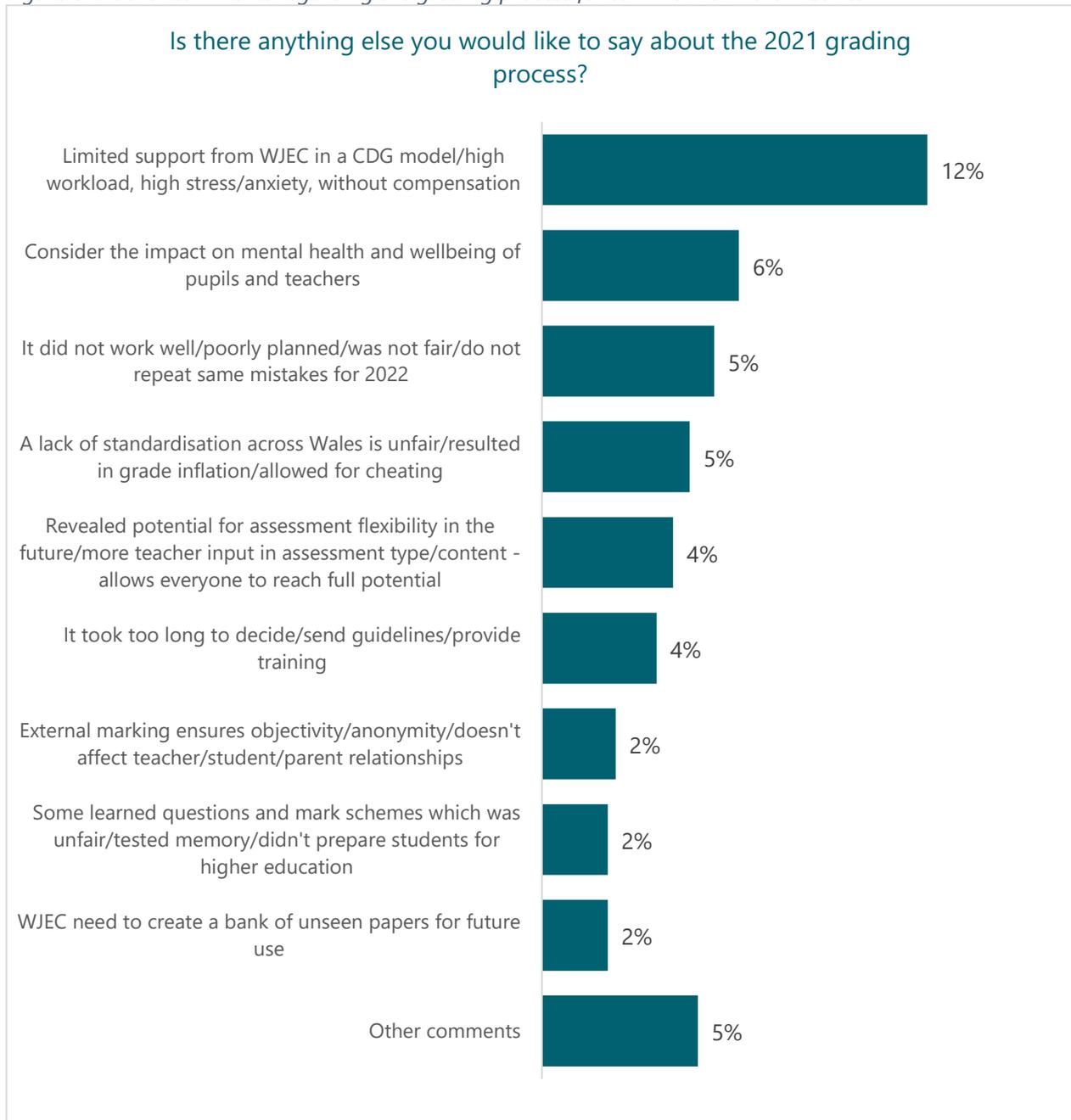
3.9. Other points raised

3.9.1. Additional comments

At the end of the survey respondents were given the opportunity to make any further comments about the 2021 grading process.

The majority (61%) chose not to make any additional comments and those comments which were given were reviewed and key themes identified (as seen in Figure 31).

Figure 31: Other comments regarding the grading process for summer 2021 exam series



Base = 395 respondents

The most common response was around the perception of limited support from WJEC with creating new papers/creating assessments/marking and standardising papers and grades, which was said to create excessive workload for teachers, and high levels of stress with little to no help or compensation. All these themes reflect comments made in earlier survey questions, and in the depth interviews.

Interviewees were also asked for any additional feedback on the 2021 grading or the 2022 assessment arrangements at the end of their interview. The themes covered by their comments mirror the themes from the survey data on this question, and feedback discussed elsewhere in the report. These included:

- Final decisions about the 2022 assessment arrangements must be made quickly.
- Awarding bodies should provide unseen exam papers, clear guidance, and appropriate support to help centres and learners prepare.
- The pandemic's impact on learners should be considered when grading in 2022 and beyond, for example, through considering a *"hybrid"* system which involves more teacher assessment; and lowering grade boundaries.
- Centres which artificially inflated grades in 2021 should be held to account.
- Teachers should be remunerated for additional work required for grading.
- External standardisation is needed if CDGs are used.
- The 2021 process went as well as possible.

4. Conclusions

The following conclusions have been drawn from the findings of this research. They highlight considerations for Qualifications Wales when making or influencing grading arrangements in the future. These conclusions are based on feedback from the online survey and depth interviews, and do not reflect the opinion of Qualifications Wales.

Centre staff reported being strongly committed to ensuring fairness for learners, although were unsure if all centres adopted an equally rigorous approach

Striving to ensure fairness and consistency for learners was at the heart of centre staff's approach throughout the summer 2021 grading process. Staff's dedication and commitment to supporting all learners to achieve to their full potential shone through in the research.

Centres reported that they strove to implement approaches to grading which were driven by robust and rigorous processes which carefully and objectively considered numerous forms of assessment evidence from learners.

However, some of those who participated in this research were less confident about the consistency and fairness of the processes which they felt could be in place at other centres.

There was a strong feeling among centre staff that reliance on published past papers made grading less fair and may have widened gaps between learners from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Centre staff argued that learners from home environments with greater access to resources and support benefitted to a greater degree.

Centre staff reported some issues with the guidance and support from WJEC

Although elements of the training provided by WJEC were praised, many participants criticised aspects of the guidance and support from the awarding body. Some interviewees also criticised the quality assurance processes, which they attributed to WJEC. However, these processes were the result of collaborative working between DDAG, Qualifications Wales, WJEC, and other stakeholders.

The workload and pressure of grading impacted on many centre staff's personal wellbeing

Centre staff told us that they worked a great many additional hours on top of their teaching responsibilities during the 2021 grading process, largely without additional pay, or sufficient ring-fenced time. Many said that they did not have a life outside of work, and hardly saw their families throughout the process. Some noted that their physical and mental health deteriorated. The pandemic presented additional challenges by causing high learner and staff absences, and requirements for home learning, it was said.

There was a sense that the 2021 grading process had been implemented as a one-off commitment under exceptional circumstances, but that centre staff could not, and should not, be expected to handle that volume of additional work again.

Although centre staff took steps to alleviate it, grading was also said to be stressful for learners

Staff said that learners found the grading process stressful, but they reported taking several steps to minimise this. These included breaking down assessments into more manageable chunks;

making sure learner circumstances were taken into consideration when appropriate when awarding grades; and clearly communicating the key tenets of the grading processes and criteria to learners (and their parents).

However, centre staff pointed out that many learners were not where they should be in terms of their attainment and maturity. They noted that learners have missed large chunks of their education. Current Year 10s to 12s have no experience of formal examinations. Teachers have had to prioritise those who are facing imminent assessments, meaning that learners in lower secondary school groups have been less of a focus.

The impact of the pandemic on learners' cognitive, psychological, and emotional development should therefore be carefully considered when finalising approaches to assessment and grading in 2022 and beyond, participants felt.

Outstanding leadership and collaboration within centres was said to be the key to success

Senior leaders within centres were said to be instrumental in making decisions around the amount and types of evidence used; creating and implementing assessment policies and grading processes; and clearly communicating important information from awarding bodies and Qualifications Wales to their colleagues.

Participants explained that grading was a collaborative process within and between centres, despite some initial logistical difficulties in holding discussions. They said that moderation and standardisation were conducted in teams within a supportive yet challenging environment. Some centres were said to provide valuable support to each other, especially where certain subjects were only taught by one member of staff.

Despite the issues raised by some participants in relation to the 2021 grading process, it was said to have provided some valuable CPD opportunities for centre staff, enabling those who were newer to the profession to learn from more experienced colleagues. The collaborative process also verified and reassured staff of their own judgement and competence, participants noted.

If there is a decision to implement a CDG model again, this research suggests that centre staff would want timely decisions, suitable materials, and appropriate support (including, in some cases, remuneration for extra time).

At the time of writing, the current policy position is that exams will take place instead of a CDG model in summer 2022.

Should the decision be made to change to a CDG model, the findings of this research suggest that centre staff would want clear decisions to be made and shared as clearly and as rapidly as possible. If possible, to achieve in the timescales, they would also welcome clearer guidance on grading (such as examples of what answers from learners at certain grade levels should look like; grade descriptors for every grade; more subject-specific guidance on grading; more specific guidance on the amount of evidence needed), standardisation, and quality assurance processes, and appropriate unseen materials and appropriate support from awarding bodies.

If a CDG model is implemented again, it is reasonable to anticipate that some centre staff would expect to be recompensed for extra time. This expectation should be anticipated and considered by those responsible for teacher contracts and pay.

5. Appendix

5.1. Respondent Profile

The following tables provide a summary of the sample.

Type of school	Number of respondents
Maintained secondary school (including sixth forms)	304
Further Education (FE) College	42
Independent school	32
Pupil referral unit	8
Adult Learning Centre	4
Maintained special school	2
Other	3
TOTAL	395

Job Role	Number of respondents
Head of Department	178
Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer	129
Deputy/Assistant Head of Centre	31
Deputy/Assistant Head of Department	26
Head of Centre	10
Head of sixth form	6
Key Stage Leader	5
Exams Officer/Manager	4
SENCo/other SEN or ALN specialist	2
Other - please specify	2
Not given	2
TOTAL	395

Region	Number of respondents
South Central	91
South East	53
West	98
North	67
Refused	86
TOTAL	395

Subject level	Involved in Grading	Involved in Standardisation
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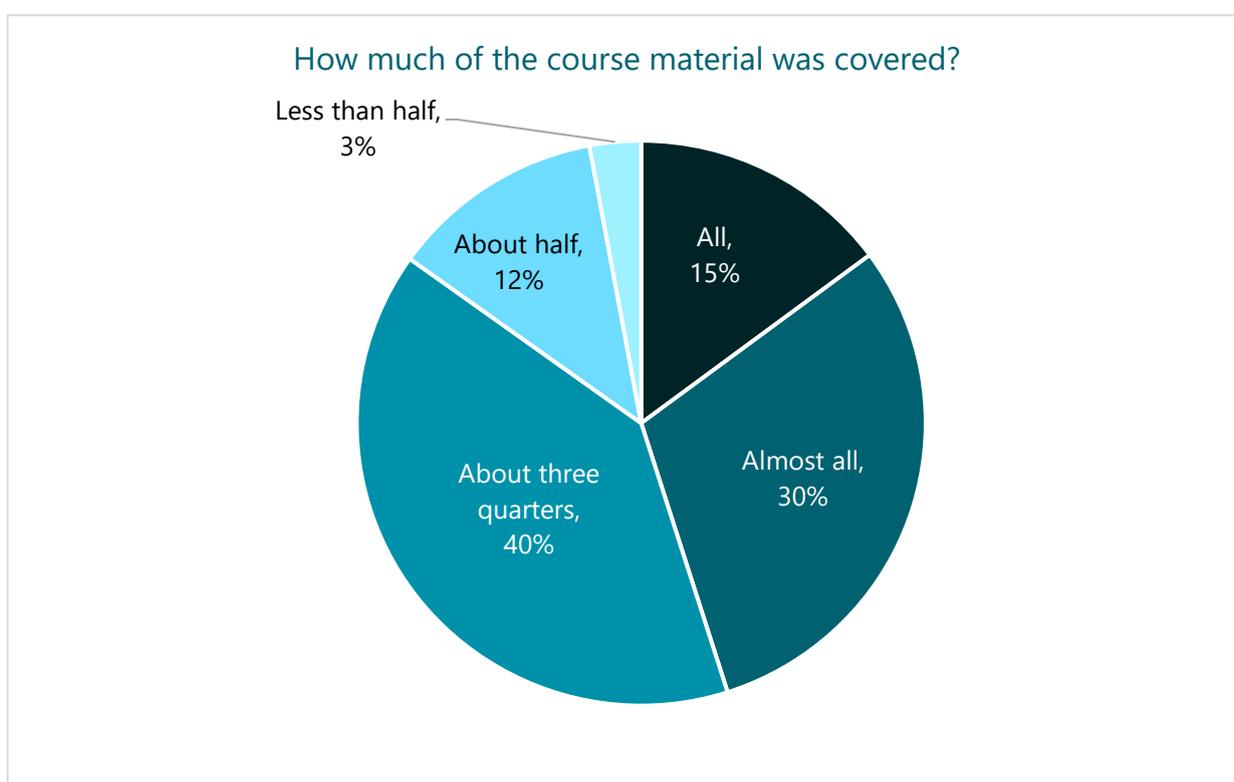
GCSE	325	318
AS level	225	219
A level	229	212
Vocational	92	69

5.1.1. Proportion of course content covered

Due to the various impacts on teaching time caused by the pandemic our survey asked what proportion of the content was covered during the year. Just under one in seven (15%) said that all course material had been covered, a further three in ten (30%) had covered almost all the material.

The ability to cover the material had clear implications for the grading process as well as future learning in the subject.

Figure 1: How much of the course material was covered?



Base: 377 respondents

5.2. The online survey

Which of the options below best describes your centre? Single code

- Maintained secondary school (including sixth forms)
- Maintained special school
- Independent school
- Independent special school
- Further Education (FE) College
- Work based learning/training provider
- Pupil referral unit
- Other – please write

Which of the following best describes your role? Single code

- Teacher, lecturer, tutor or trainer
- Deputy/Assistant Head of Department
- Head of Department
- Key Stage Leader
- Head of sixth form
- SENCo/other SEN or ALN specialist
- Deputy/Assistant Head of Centre
- Head of Centre
- Other (please specify)

Did you judge grades for the following types of qualification?

	Yes	No
Vocational qualifications		
GCSE		
AS		
A levels		

Which levels and subjects were you involved in making grading judgements for?

Were you involved in internal standardisation of grades within the centre?

- Yes
- No

Which qualification types and subjects did you standardise for?

Approximately how many learners did you make grading judgements or internal standardisation decisions for across general and vocational qualifications?

- 10 or fewer
- 11-30
- 31-60
- 61-90
- More than 90

Please select which qualification type you would like to answer these questions

about.

For your selected qualification, approximately how much of the course do you think was covered in total? Please include home learning in your estimate.

- Less than half
- About half
- About three quarters
- Almost all
- All

Approach to gathering assessment evidence to inform grading

How many assessments were organised (in addition to those you had already planned) for the purpose of making grading judgements? Write in

Were all of these assessments used as evidence for making grading judgements?

- Yes
- No
- Can't remember/don't know

Did you use any other evidence from assessments that weren't originally intended to inform grading judgements?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

What was your approach to selecting assessment evidence to use for grading?

- We selected the same assessments for all learners
- We selected different assessments for different learners

How important were each of the following when making your decision on the amount of evidence you gathered to make grading decisions for your learners?

	Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not at all important	Don't know	Not applicable
Provision of a robust evidence base to make judgements						
Giving students the best opportunity to show what they could do						
Provision of a robust evidence base in case of appeals						
Perceived or actual pressure from parents						
Perceived or actual						

pressure from learners						
What the awarding body required						
The anticipation of external quality assurance						
Your centre policy						
Decisions by senior leadership						
Decisions by the Head of Department						

What was your approach to using past papers/assessment tasks? Multi-code

- We used the adapted past papers/assessment tasks provided by WJEC/the awarding body specifically for summer 2021
- We used the adapted past papers/assessment tasks provided by WJEC/the awarding body specifically for summer 2021 but made further adaptations to them in the centre
- We used exam papers/assessment tasks from previous years without adaptation
- We used exam papers/assessment tasks from previous years but made our own adaptations to them
- We did not use past awarding body papers/assessment tasks – we relied entirely on our own assessments
- n/a

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the evidence you collected to support the grading judgements also helped to support further learning?

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not sure

How important were each of the following forms of evidence when making grading decisions?

	Very important	Quite important	Not very important	Not at all important	N/A	Did not use
Adapted past papers/assessment tasks provided by WJEC/awarding body						
Other past papers/assessment tasks						
Class tests (not based on past papers)						

Class work						
Homework						
Participation in performances/practicals						
Completed pieces of non-examination assessment (NEA)						
Incomplete pieces of NEA						
Learner performance in external standardised tests/assessments not provided by WJEC/the awarding body						

Were there any other forms of evidence which were important in your grading decisions? Please explain what they were, and how important they were when making grading decisions.

Was there any type of evidence you would have liked to use but were not able to?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

What type of evidence was this?

To make grading decisions, did you use grade boundaries previously published by the awarding body to determine the grade?

- Yes
- No

Which (if any) of the following did you consider before making your judgements? Please tick all that apply.

- Grade descriptors
- Guidance from WJEC/awarding body
- Previous years' student outcomes (2019 or earlier)
- Previous years' candidate work (e.g. examination scripts, NEA, coursework)
- Mark schemes for past papers
- Published grade boundaries for past papers
- None of the above

Who marked and graded the assessments used to make judgements in your centre? Please tick all that apply.

- I marked for learners I taught
- I graded for learners I taught
- I marked for learners I didn't teach
- I graded for learners I didn't teach
- Work for learners I taught was marked by others/senior staff

- Work for learners I taught was graded by others/senior staff
- Others

Did you take any of the following steps when marking or grading work in your centre aimed at improving the impartiality of the process? Please tick all that apply.

- Anonymised the work by removing names
- Double marked/graded the work
- Ensured that you did not mark the work of your own students
- Randomly selected work for internal standardisation/moderation
- Implemented other measures (please specify)

Were you aware of any guidance about making objective judgements provided by WJEC/the awarding body?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure/Can't remember

Did you attend training from any of the following on the grading process?

- WJEC/awarding body
- Your own centre
- A centre other than the one you teach in
- Other (please give details)

Internal standardisation

How easy or difficult was it to agree grades with other staff members during the internal standardisation process? Tick ONE box only.

- Very easy
- Quite easy
- Neither easy nor difficult
- Quite difficult
- Very difficult

Did you experience any of these difficulties when agreeing grades with others as part of internal standardisation in your centre? Please select all that apply.

- No difficulties
- Logistical difficulties in holding discussions
- Different emphasis on different sources of evidence
- Different interpretation of standard of work
- Different views on which aspects of learner work should influence the grade
- Different interpretation of how to apply the grade descriptors
- Different views on how the internal quality assurance process would work
- Different views on how the external quality assurance process would work
- Other difficulty – please explain.

Did you change any grades (up or down) as a result of internal standardisation? Please tick all that apply.

- Yes, changed grades up
- Yes, changed grades down
- No, did not change grades

SECTION 2: GENERIC QUESTIONS / POST LOOP

Now thinking in general/across all qualifications you were involved with...

Did you/your centre work with other centres to discuss grading approaches?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Did you/your centre work with other centres to standardise grades across centres?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

To what extent were you confident in the external quality assurance processes run by WJEC/the awarding body?

- Very confident
- Fairly confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Fairly unconfident
- Very unconfident
- Don't know

How confident did you feel about the accuracy of the grades that were awarded?

- Very confident
- Fairly confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Fairly unconfident
- Very unconfident
- Don't know

How confident did you feel about the accuracy of the grades awarded in other centres?

- Very confident
- Fairly confident
- Neither confident nor unconfident
- Fairly unconfident
- Very unconfident
- Don't know

Do you think the approach used for grading this year was fairer than in past years when exams took place?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Please explain your answer.

Do you feel that the approach advantaged or disadvantaged any learners more than others in your centre?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

Do you feel that the approach advantaged or disadvantaged any learners more than others across all centres?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know

How do you feel learners were advantaged or disadvantaged? Please write in below.

How manageable did you find the process of determining the grades overall?

- Very manageable
- Quite manageable
- Quite unmanageable
- Very unmanageable

Please provide an estimate, in hours, of how long you dedicated to working on the whole grading process in total.

To what extent did the process impact on the time available to teach/complete other work?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To a lesser extent
- It did not impact at all

To what extent did the process impact on your personal wellbeing?

- To a great extent
- To some extent
- To a lesser extent
- It did not impact at all

How well prepared do think learners are for progression on to employment/further learning in 2022?

- Very well prepared
- Fairly well prepared

- Neither prepared nor unprepared
- Fairly unprepared
- Very unprepared
- I don't know

When considering the grading process as a whole what do you think worked well and why? Please write in below.

When considering the grading process as a whole, do you think that there is anything that did not work as well and if so, why? Please write in below.

What one recommendation can you make that would have improved the 2021 grading process? Please write in below.

To what extent would you feel comfortable about making grading judgements for qualifications in 2022, if it became necessary to cancel examinations due to the public health situation?

- Very comfortable
- Quite comfortable
- Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable
- Quite uncomfortable
- Very uncomfortable
- I don't know

Having been through the experience of 2021, how do you think teachers should be involved in GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed? Do you think they should have...?

- More involvement
- About the same involvement as before the pandemic
- Less involvement

Is there anything else you would like to tell us in relation to the grading process for qualifications in the summer 2021 exam series?

Which region(s) do you work in? Multi-code

- South Central (Bridgend, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Vale of Glamorgan)
- Southeast (Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, and Torfaen)
- West (Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys, and Swansea)
- North (Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, and Wrexham)

How many years have you held a role at your current centre? Please round to the nearest whole year.

- Less than 2
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11- 20
- More than 20

How many years have you been teaching or working in education? Please round to the nearest whole year.

- Less than 2
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11- 20
- More than 20

Have you ever been a paid examiner or EQA/moderator for an awarding body?

- Yes
- No

5.3. The depth interview topic guide

Qualifications Wales:

Research with education professionals to explore their perceptions and experiences of making grading decisions for qualifications completed in summer 2021

Introduction

Qualifications Wales has commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to explore education professionals' perceptions and experiences of making grading decisions for qualifications completed in summer 2021. This research will help Qualifications Wales, and the wider education system, understand as much as possible about the process of awarding centre determined grades and what they can learn from it.

The findings may also be used to help to shape Qualifications Wales' thinking about how qualifications could be awarded in 2022 and beyond, including how they could be designed in line with the new Curriculum for Wales.

We've asked you to speak to us today because you are an education professional working in a school/college in Wales who made or oversaw grading decisions for qualifications completed in summer 2021. You provisionally agreed to take part in an interview in the online survey that you completed on this topic. The interview will explore your survey responses in more depth.

Since you completed the survey, Qualifications Wales has announced its grading arrangements for summer 2022. While today's interview will mainly look back to the summer 2021 arrangements, you will have the opportunity at the end of the interview to share your thoughts on the 2022 arrangements.

The interview will take around one hour, depending on your answers. Taking part is completely voluntary, and you can change your mind at any time, up until 4th January 2021. If it's OK with you, I'd like to record the interview to back up my notes. Only ORS's research team will hear the recording, and we will delete it once the interview is written up. We will be sharing the anonymised interview write-ups with Qualifications Wales after the project ends.

We will be writing a report for Qualifications Wales based on your and other interviewee's feedback, and on the outcomes from the online survey. We won't name you or your school/college, or identify you in any way in our report, we may use anonymised quotes from your interview. The information sheet we sent you contains a link to the project's privacy notice which explains more about how we will use and store your data.

Would you like to ask me any questions before we begin?

1. Background

1a. Please can you describe your role in relation to the grading process in summer 2021?

Researcher: Check survey data – was interviewee involved in grading and/or standardisation? Did they grade for their own learners? Were they involved with AQs and VQs, or one or the other? Briefly verify this information with interviewee here.

2. Approach to gathering assessment evidence to inform grading

Researcher: State this only when interviewing those who said that they graded/standardised for VQs and AQs.

When answering the following questions, please state whether you are referring to the VQs or the AQs you graded/standardised, or both.

2a. **Researcher:** Run through interviewees' answers to survey questions relating to approach to selecting assessment evidence to use for grading: How important were the following factors when making your decision on the amount of evidence you gathered to make grading decisions for your learners?

Please can you explain why those factors were more important, and less important, to you when making grading decisions?

2b. **Researcher:** Run through interviewees' answers to survey questions relating to how important each form of evidence was when making grading decisions.

Please can you explain why those forms of evidence were more important, and less important, to you when making grading decisions?

2c. **Researcher:** Run through interviewees' answer to survey Q4 – did they use the same, or different, assessments for all learners.

Please can you explain why you used the same/different assessments for all learners?

2d. How did you and your centre select the pieces of evidence that you used to determine grades?

2e. Did you have enough flexibility to select the pieces of evidence that you used to determine grades?

- *Prompt: Would you have preferred more or less flexibility? Why?*

2f. The guidance for centres on grading referred to making holistic academic judgements. What did you understand by this, and how did it work in practice?

2g. What grade boundaries did you use, and how did you use them?

- *Prompt: How did you manage allocating learners to one grade or another, especially borderline cases?*
- *Prompt (if not covered in main response): How could the grade descriptors have been improved?*

3. Training and guidance

3a. How clear were you on your roles and responsibilities throughout the grading process?

- *Prompt: What support, if any, would you have liked to clarify your roles and responsibilities?*

3b. How effective was the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales, and by WJEC/the awarding body when making grading decisions?

Researcher: *Prompt for any differences in perceptions of the training and guidance provided by QW/WJEC /awarding bodies.*

- *Prompt: How could the training and guidance provided by Qualifications Wales, and by WJEC/the awarding body have been improved? Probe for clarity/specific gaps.*

4. Internal standardisation

4a. How did you work together with staff within your centre to agree grades during the internal standardisation process?

4b. How effective was standardisation as a quality assurance process?

4c. **Researcher:** Only ask Q4c to those who said they changed grades up or down in the survey (Q18).

In the survey, you said that you changed grades [**Researcher:** state response to Q18: changed grades up or down]. What was the reasoning behind this?

Overall, how manageable and effective did you find the internal standardisation process, and why?

5. Confidence in quality assurance processes and grade accuracy

5a. **Researcher:** Summarise interviewees' response to questions 19/20 on the survey: Did you/your centre work with other centres to discuss grading approaches? Did you/your centre work with other centres to standardise grades?

Researcher: Ask if interviewee said on the survey that they worked with other centres:

How did this go? What went well/less well?

Researcher: Ask if interviewee said on the survey that they did not work with other centres:

If you didn't work with other centres to discuss or standardise grades, would you have liked to?

5b. In the survey, you said that you were [**Researcher:** state response to Q21 – confidence in the external QA processes run by WJEC/the awarding body – very confident to don't know] in the external QA processes run by WJEC and/or the awarding body.

Please can you explain why that was?

- *Prompt: What worked well, and less well, about the external QA processes?*

5c. In the survey, you said that you were [**Researcher:** state response to Q22 – confidence in grades awarded – very confident to don't know] in the accuracy of the grades awarded by your centre.

Please can you explain why that was?

5d. In the survey, you said that you were [**Researcher:** state response to Q23: How confident did you feel about the accuracy of the grades awarded in other centres? Very confident to don't know] in the accuracy of the grades awarded by other centres?

Please can you explain why that was?

5e. How did the grades awarded compare to predicted grades for university applications?

- *Prompt: To what extent did the grades awarded match learners' expectations?*

6. Fairness

6a. In the survey, you said that the approach used for grading this year was [**Researcher:** state response to Q24A – grading approach was fairer/less fair than in previous years when exams took place]

Please can you explain why that was?

- *Prompt: What would you have done to make the grading approach fairer?*

7. Impacts

7a. In the survey, you said you found the grading process [**Researcher:** state response to Q27 – how manageable did you find the process of determining the grades overall – very manageable – very unmanageable]

Please can you explain why that is?

- *Prompt: Were there any other factors that influenced the manageability of the grading process? If so, how did your centre deal with this?*
- *Prompt: What, if anything, would have made the grading process more manageable for you?*

7b. In the survey, you said you felt that learners were [**Researcher:** state response to Q31 – How well prepared do you think learners are for progression on to employment/further learning in 2022 – very well prepared – very unprepared]

Please can you explain why that is?

7c. Did you experience any difficulties or conflicts with parents or learners over grades that you/your centre awarded? If so, what impact did it have?

7d. In the survey, you said that the process impacted on your personal wellbeing [**Researcher:** state response to Q30 – To what extent did the process impact on your personal wellbeing? – to a great extent – not at all]

Please can you explain what impact the process had on your wellbeing?

7e. [**Researcher:** Only ask Q7e if interviewee states that the process impacted on their personal wellbeing]

What, if anything, would have lessened the impact of the process of your personal wellbeing?

8. Looking ahead

8a. **Researcher:** Review response to Q36. Only ask Q8a to those who said that they would like more or less involvement with GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed in response to Q36 – **not** those who said they would like the same level of involvement.

In the survey, you said that teachers should have [**Researcher:** Summarise response to Q36 – More involvement/less involvement] with GCSE grading the next time qualifications are reformed.

What would you want that involvement to look like?

- *Prompt: Would you like to be involved in the wider grading process, for example, working with/assisting WJEC?*
- *Prompt: [If interviewee indicates that they would like more engagement] Would having more involvement in the grading process impact on manageability for teachers, and if so, how could this impact be minimised?*

8b. How would you like to see teacher assessment used in future?

8c. What should future quality assurance processes of teacher assessment look like?

8d. How confident are you in the planned adaptations to the assessment arrangements for 2022, and why?

8e. What challenges can you foresee arising when the 2022 assessment arrangements are implemented, and how can they best be mitigated?

9. Conclusions

9a. Is there anything else you would like to say about the 2021 grading or the 2022 assessment arrangements?

Thank interviewee and close