



# **OCN NI Guidance for Exceptional Arrangements - Assessing and Grading Essential Skills Qualifications with External Assessments 2021**

**February 2021**

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## Background Information

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The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and learning from March 2020, which was characterised by the government's response to qualification delivery and awarding has been significant. Coronavirus lockdown restrictions in Northern Ireland were extended to the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021.

The Summer Guidance 2020 (Calculated Assessment Grades) window closed in September 2020 and new autumn 2020 guidance was prepared and approved by the Qualifications Regulators. OCN NI has been recommending this guidance to centres to help mitigate disruption to teaching, learning and assessments so that, as far as possible, Learners taking VTQs and 'other general' qualifications, have the opportunity to receive a fair result and are not disadvantaged by the longer term impacts of the pandemic.

OCN NI has been working hard to ensure that our guidance and arrangements supporting mitigations are compliant with the new regulatory framework which will operate between 1<sup>st</sup> March and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021 so that the range of mitigations and adaptations will enable fair and robust assessment and awarding. In relation to Essential Skills, DfE Minister, Diane Dodds has announced that external exams will be cancelled after 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 and replaced with a "teacher judgement approach, based upon suitable evidence."

Over the past few weeks the qualifications regulators in Northern Ireland, England, and Wales have been working closely with awarding organisations, government departments, and the wider sector to agree a new framework of extraordinary measures. This new framework will be based, as far as possible, on the 7 principles of the new interim regulatory framework that all students and other Learners taking such qualifications should, wherever possible, receive a result that fairly reflects the work that they have put in and their level of attainment, and is robustly assessed using teacher assessed judgements using reliable sources of evidence.

Having reviewed the new guidance set by the qualifications regulators, OCN NI has produced this guidance document to help our centres come to appropriate judgements in line with the policy set out above. Our priority is to ensure that Essential Skills Learners receive fair and robust results over the coming months that reflect their efforts to date and allow for due consideration of progression pathways, whether that be to study further or enter employment.

This document addresses Essential Skills NI qualifications provided by OCN NI. The information is provided in the context of the most up-to-date advice for educational settings provided by the Department of Education and HSC Public Health Agency and is compliant with DfE direction and CCEA Regulation guidance.

## How will Qualifications be Awarded

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Essential Skills NI qualifications are taken by a wide range of Learners, including apprentices, and play an important role in supporting progression to both further study and to and through employment. The NI qualifications regulator has agreed that these qualifications should be treated in a way that recognises the need for 'fair and robust' awarding (Minister Diane Dodds 8<sup>th</sup> January 2021). Learners will be awarded an Achieved/Not Achieved grade on the basis of a Centre Determined Grades (CDG) approach, based on trusted evidence. External moderation will be carried out to ensure that the evidence supporting judgements is consistent with the standard. (See detailed guidance below).

Qualifications that fall in scope of this guidance *i.e.* those that are assessed externally via on demand examination:

- Level 1 Certificate in Essential Skills - Application of Number
- Level 1 Certificate in Essential Skills - Communication (Reading & Writing)
- Level 2 Certificate in Essential Skills - Application of Number
- Level 2 Certificate in Essential Skills - Communication (Reading & Writing)

**Note: Speaking and Listening should be completed and assessed using the adaptations guidance document provided in October 2020 <https://bit.ly/2ZISSgl>**

Qualifications that fall out of scope of this guidance *i.e.* those that are assessed internally and create a portfolio of evidence fall under OCN NI general VTQ guidance:

- Entry Level Certificate in Essential Skills - Adult Literacy
- Entry Level Certificate in Essential Skills - Adult Numeracy
- Level 1 Certificate in Essential Skills - ICT
- Level 2 Certificate in Essential Skills - ICT

**The period when Essential Skills examinations will not take place is 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021 therefore, Learners will be awarded by examination until 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 when examinations will cease and be replaced by alternative assessment.**

Centre determined Achieved/Not Achieved Grades will draw appropriately on a range of trusted evidence which will be outlined below but will require proof of delivery and progression. OCN NI guidance outlined in October 2020 (see link above) anticipated this by advising centres to **teach-assess-bank/record** so that an effective evidential tracking of Learner progress could be easily identified and would clearly support teacher judgements. The current guidance incorporates the 'tracking of Learner progress' and clearly adheres to the Minister's term 'trusted sources of evidence'. Therefore, Learners who have been on the Essential Skills learning journey to reach exam readiness (which now translates to 'a competent level confirming achievement') can be awarded.

Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) must be based on trusted sources of evidence and OCN NI has detailed the criteria and sources of evidence that must be in place before a centre can submit a claim for certification. Any centre determined grade will be based on a range of evidence held by the school, college or training provider. OCN NI will externally moderate submissions for achievement and certification from all centres by randomly sampling Learner evidence. This will be done remotely and centres are required to support this process to enable certification to be completed.

OCN NI will co-operate with centres in accessing Learner evidence remotely in compliance with PHA and Covid-19 requirements. **CCEA Regulation have stated that if centres submit a result after 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021, they are required to have a contact person available during the summer period, so that at all times requested evidence can be accessed.**

In addition, OCN NI will use any centre determined grade, combined with other relevant information, to confirm the assessed Achieved/Not Achieved grade. It is important to ensure that, as far as possible, standards are maintained, such that everyone can continue to have confidence in the qualifications and they retain their currency. This lies behind the Minister's request for CDGs with trusted sources of evidence. Consequently, OCN NI will require sufficient evidence upon which to base awards. Centres should complete OCN NI's ES CDG Form which will be available to all centres in March (an evidence spreadsheet centres should complete to record all the evidence used in determining a grade). This should be emailed to [essentialskills@ocni.org.uk](mailto:essentialskills@ocni.org.uk).

OCN NI will conduct external moderation and confirm certification. We are clear on the need for a rolling awarding process to meet the needs of Learners and centres and to ensure steady and consistent management without unnecessary bottlenecks in awarding. Therefore, centres should begin the process of assessing and grading where Learners will not be sitting an examination.

## Which Learners will receive Centre Determined Achieved/Not Achieved Grades?

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An Achieved/Not Achieved grade in Essential Skills should be determined for Learners who legitimately expected to take an Essential Skills examination between 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021, and for those Learners who could not take their planned external assessment during January/February 2021 for reasons outside of their control.

In line with CCEA Regulation's Awarding Guidance, centres are required to provide evidence authenticating candidate eligibility which can be confirmed by Awarding Organisations. An eligibility profile should include the following information:

- i. Date of Initial Assessment, Assessment level and Target level;
- ii. Details of the class / delivery model, day, time;
- iii. Total number of Guided Learning Hours attended including an indication if instruction was face-to-face or carried out remotely;
- iv. Tracking to indicate coverage of content/readiness to take examination; and
- v. Authentication indication - Learner and Teacher signature, or electronic alternatives.

OCN NI is complying with regulatory guidance (7.3) which requires Awarding Organisations to take all reasonable steps to ensure that a result is determined by alternative arrangements leading to a centre determined grade, based upon suitable evidence. If there is insufficient evidence to meet CCEA Regulation requirements for the determination of a result through alternative arrangements Awarding Organisations must not award an Achieved grade, therefore OCN NI recommends that centres should submit CDGs clearly distinguishing between Achieved and Not Achieved Grades. Specific guidance on how to submit Centre Determined Grades will be provided in a separate document.

## Essential Skills

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The Essential Skills NI qualification suite has been included under this Vocational and Technical heading and in particular the designated approach to the Essential Skills Level 1 and 2 Application of Number and Communication qualifications which normally require an external examination.

A Grade (Achieved/Not Achieved) in Essential Skills should be determined for Learners who legitimately expected to take an Essential Skills examination between 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021, and for those Learners who could not take their planned external assessment during January/February 2021 for reasons outside of their control.

The Minister has stated that while Essential Skills external assessments have been cancelled they have been replaced by Centre Determined Grades (CDGs) using a teacher judgement approach, based upon suitable evidence. OCN NI in adopting this approach will require centres to complete:

- i. Eligibility criteria listing
- ii. OCN NI Essential Skills workbook (including a list of formative evidence which reflects Learner progress and must be dated.)
- iii. Speaking and Listening (Communication Level 1 and Level 2)

There will be no requirement to send any supporting evidence to OCN NI with the submission. However, centres must retain Learner evidence and appropriate records of this work (including any material listed as trusted sources of evidence) for External Moderation by OCN NI.

As the OCN NI qualification for Essential Skills Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a portfolio-based qualification please see **The OCN NI Centre Guidance - VTQ Assessments 2021** for guidance on submitting results.

## **Guidelines for Centre Determined Achieved/Not Achieved Grades**

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OCN NI, in discussion with the other awarding organisations and the NI qualifications regulator, have agreed a joint approach to guidance which outlines how centres should work towards reaching a centre determined Achieved/Not Achieved grade. This also includes how awarding organisations will apply quality assurance to centre submissions in controlling the final award.

### **External Monitoring, Reliability and Validity**

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In line with DfE and regulatory guidance, Learner achievement and awarding will be based on trusted sources of evidence tracking the individual performance of Learners and providing evidence of the learning journey to assessment readiness. OCN NI has provided clear criteria which centres must meet in order to submit results. Consequently, we will conduct external monitoring of evidence through sampling candidate evidence listed in the awarding criteria.

#### **OCN NI Quality Assurance Monitoring**

OCN NI will conduct random sampling against submitted evidence to ensure process and practice are reliable and valid and the award can be made. This will be carried out remotely and evidence must be made available upon request. OCN NI is aware of the additional burden on centres and will try to mitigate this as far as possible. Regulatory policy requires centres to have contacts available during the summer period to facilitate external monitoring requests (as stated previously). OCN NI will require a contact who can access Essential Skills evidence so that this process can function effectively.

#### **Centre Internal Quality Assurance**

OCN NI require centres to carry out three quality assurance activities:

- i. Administration process check on details relating to the submissions. This is a due diligence requirement on the completion of submission forms and is intended to confirm that all appropriate criteria have been met before submission claims are made. Centres should be clear that submission claims will identify Achieved/Not Achieved candidates. (Specific guidance on how to submit Centre Determined Grades will be provided in a separate document).
- ii. Centres should carry out internal verification sampling on portfolio evidence to confirm standards are met. Effective records for assessment and internal verification should be retained.
- iii. Head of Centre approval and declaration form to be signed off and submitted.

We believe this approach is in the best interests of Learners, Teachers/Tutors and standards. Under the supervision of Heads of Department/Essential Skills Co-ordinators, internal moderation must consider Learner's performance. Centres should base their individual assessment decisions on trusted evidence and use the appropriate OCN NI ES CDG Form to capture a summary justifying their decision which should be signed off by the Centre Head and Essential Skills Co-ordinator as part of the centre quality assurance process.

OCN NI will require a confirmation of % percentage attendance/engagement with the ES NI curriculum which is based on the adult literacy and numeracy standards. Schools should *not* submit candidates for Essential Skills qualifications if they have been solely following a GCSE curriculum as CCEA Regulation advises that this is not appropriate for submission for awarding of Essential Skills qualifications.

### **Submission Evidence Requirement Criteria**

The following criteria are intended as the recommended approach for centres and OCN NI will require centre staff involved in the delivery of Essential Skills qualifications 'normally' requiring an external assessment (Communication Level 1 and 2 (Reading and Writing) and Application of Number Level 1 and 2) to use these guidance criteria in determining a Achieved/Not Achieved grade for their Essential Skills Learners.

### **Criteria for Determining the Award**

The key guiding principle for determining the award is that trusted sources of evidence provide the means for determining a Achieved/Not Achieved grade. It is important that determined judgements are objective, and they should only take account of the evidence a Learner has provided. This must include the OCN NI Essential Skills workbook and the list of reliable and trusted evidence supporting progression to achievement. In the autumn OCN NI recommended a teach-assess-bank approach which will enable centres to provide relevant examples of formative evidence.

In determining results through a CDG approach centres should base their grading judgements for these Essential Skills Qualifications on the highest quality evidence in determining individual results. An OCN NI Essential Skills workbook must be completed at the appropriate standard and supported with a list of formative evidence<sup>1</sup> (indicating progression on the learning journey to achievement). The Essential Skills workbook will be available to order through QuartzWeb. Additional Guidance on how to order these and claiming results will be sent to centres as an addendum.

<sup>1</sup> OCN NI Essential Skills workbook is constructed reflecting the structure of the current external assessment papers (composed of 2 to 3 summative tasks with supporting marking schemes). The workbook also requires Centre Assessors to include a list of examples of formative evidence which reflects the Learner's progress to achievement approximating the standard. The Teacher/Tutor judgement will be recognised in completing the formative evidence list *i.e.* the list can comprise of representative evidence of work carried out by the Learner this should be drawn from evidence referred to in teach-assess-bank guidance provided by OCN NI in October 2020.



## Reasonable Adjustments/Special Considerations

Where Learners have OCN NI agreed reasonable adjustments or access arrangements (for example extra time), the centre assessment should take account of likely achievement with the reasonable adjustment/access arrangement in place. Please ensure Reasonable Adjustment requests for all Learners being submitted are included in the ES CDG Form.

In the case of Special Considerations, centres should submit a Reasonable Adjustment & Special Consideration form to [essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk](mailto:essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk)

## Will there be a right to Appeal?

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There may be some Learners who feel that their Centre Determined Achieved/Not Achieved Grades do not properly reflect their ability. We are all focused on minimising any disadvantage to Learners as a result of these unprecedented circumstances, including allowing for an appeal where appropriate. Learners may appeal their grade to OCN NI through their centre. This will be the right to appeal process for candidates who wish to challenge their result. Learners should be aware that all submissions by centres will be based on reliable sources of evidence and not solely on teacher judgements.

### **Note**

- 1. OCN NI will request and inspect supporting evidence at its discretion in the event of appeals.***
- 2. All external assessments taken before the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2021 will be issued with a result under normal OCN NI working procedures. The normal OCN NI appeals process will apply for all external assessments prior to the affected period.***

## Department Approval

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All centre submissions for Essential Skills must be based on reliable and trusted sources of evidence as outlined by OCN NI and confirmed in conjunction with the submissions criteria. They should be reviewed by the Teacher/Tutor and quality assured by the Head of Department/Essential Skills Co-ordinator.

Where a staff member might have a personal interest in the performance of a candidate (for example as a relative), this must be disclosed to the Head of Centre. The Head of Centre must make appropriate arrangements to ensure any perceived or actual conflict of interest is appropriately addressed.

## Head of Centre Approval and Declaration

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*The Head of Centre will be required to confirm that the Centre Determined Grades are a true representation of Learner performance which have been based on trusted sources of evidence and internal quality checks. If the Head of Centre is unavailable to do this, the Board of Governors may delegate a deputy Head of Centre. However, the Board of Governors should notify OCN NI of this change. In reviewing these Centre Determined Grades, the Head of Centre should consider the distribution of the Centre Determined Grades in comparison to results achieved by the centre in previous two years where this is available.*

*The Head of Centre will be required to submit the following declaration before the data is submitted.*

*I confirm that these Centre Determined Grades for Learners are accurate and represent the professional Centre Determined Grades made by my staff and based on reliable sources of evidence provided by each Learner. Having reviewed the relevant processes and data, I understand that OCN NI will conduct external monitoring and sampling of submissions. I am confident that they honestly and fairly represent an internal quality assured process as outlined in OCN NI's guidance, and they have not been disclosed to either the candidate or their parent/guardian/carer. If the profile of results submitted is substantially different from what might be expected based on my centre's results in the previous two years, where available, and the prior attainment of this year's Learners, I understand that we may be asked to clarify the results for my centre and that they may be adjusted to bring them into line with overall standards.*

## How to Submit Information

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OCN NI has adapted its IT systems to collect this data in a way that is as straightforward as possible for the centre. The final deadline for submission of data will be specified by OCN NI in line with the agreed closure date of the awarding window for 2021. When the IT system is completed, OCN NI awarding organisation will issue instructions on how to submit information. Centres can commence the work to generate Centre Determined Grades, but they will not be able to submit data or have access to the OCN NI Essential Skills workbook until week beginning 5<sup>th</sup> April 2021. Centres should ensure they have followed OCN NI guidance and completed the criteria check before submission. If centres do not submit the required information about a student by the specified date(s), it will not be possible to provide an award for that student.

OCN NI has adapted QuartzWeb to accommodate Centre Determined Achieved/Not Achieved Grades in a way that is as straightforward as possible for the centre. The final deadline for submission of results is 31<sup>st</sup> August 2021. **All results determined through alternative arrangements will be issued by 12<sup>th</sup> August 2021 for Learners who have completed assessments and submitted by 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021 and as soon as possible after assessment is complete for all remaining Learners. (As outlined by Regulatory Guidance).**

## Centre Action Checklist

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Ensure you have completed the checklist before making your submissions.

1. Sign declaration from the Head of Centre or Deputy (as above) and email to [compliance@ocnni.org.uk](mailto:compliance@ocnni.org.uk)
2. Submit marksheets via QuartzWeb (refer to **How to upload Essential Skills results guidance**)
3. Submit **ES CDG Form** to [essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk](mailto:essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk)
4. Retain evidence for OCN NI external monitoring

## Contact Details

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If you have any queries about the OCN NI operating procedures please do not hesitate to contact us.

Nature of query	Who to contact	email address & tel no
General queries Course administration Online registration & certification (Quartz)	Customer Services	<a href="mailto:customerservices@ocnni.org.uk">customerservices@ocnni.org.uk</a> Tel: 028 90463990
Head of Centre Declarations	Compliance & Audit	<a href="mailto:compliance@ocnni.org.uk">compliance@ocnni.org.uk</a>
ES CDG Forms	Essential Skills Team	<a href="mailto:essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk">essentialskills@ocnni.org.uk</a> Tel: 028 9046 3990
Fees Invoices	Accounts	<a href="mailto:accounts@ocnni.org.uk">accounts@ocnni.org.uk</a> Tel: 028 90463990

It is our policy to deal with queries in a clear and friendly manner, with no undue delay and preferably within 48 hours. If we are unable to respond fully within 48 hours, we will provide you with an estimated response date.

Enquiries are received initially by team members as indicated above and then, if necessary, transferred to the relevant person/team within OCN NI.

Office hours are 08:30 to 16:45 Monday to Thursday and 08:30 to 16:00 Friday (excluding Public and Bank Holidays and Christmas closure) with voicemail available outside of normal office hours.

#### NOTE

1. Essential Skills form part of the Vocational, Technical and Other Qualifications provision which is managed by Minister for the Department for the Economy (DfE), Diane Dodds, and **NOT** Peter Weir Minister for the Department of Education NI (DE). We would advise centres that OCN NI guidance is fully compliant with regulatory guidance regarding VTQs and that centres should be clear that Essential Skills qualifications are part of the provision overseen by DfE.
2. As the OCN NI qualification for Essential Skills Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a portfolio-based qualification please see **The OCN NI Centre Guidance - VTQ Assessments 2021** for guidance on submitting results.