

Monitoring of the practical endorsement for A level biology, chemistry and physics for first teaching September 2015

A message issued on behalf of all four awarding organisations with accredited science A levels in England (AQA, Eduqas, OCR and Pearson)

The cross-awarding organisation trial

During autumn 2014, all four awarding organisations worked together with teachers from some thirty schools and colleges, and with Ofqual, to trial arrangements for the practical endorsement. You can view a video of feedback from the trials on each of our websites.

The trial aimed to:

- ensure that teachers were able to make accurate and consistent judgements about learners' practical competencies using the draft common practical assessment criteria (CPAC);
- consider the support and guidance that would be necessary for schools and colleges nationally to apply the criteria effectively;
- consider arrangements for the conduct and monitoring of practicals for schools, colleges and awarding organisations and recommend an approach that would be manageable and scalable;
- consider appropriate and proportionate arrangements for teachers and learners to record practical activities and attainments.

The Common Practical Assessment Criteria (CPAC) are being amended to reflect feedback from the trials and we have shared our report with Ofqual. You can read a copy of the report and our recommendations on the awarding organisation websites.

Ofqual now have to consult on the relevant conditions and guidance to bring the CPAC and assessment arrangements in to force. This consultation, including the proposed amendments to the CPAC, will be available on their website shortly at www.ofqual.gov.uk.

We will update our specifications as soon as these arrangements are finalised in the light of the outcomes from Ofqual's consultation.

Background to practical assessment in A level sciences from 2015

As a part of the changes to all GCE A level biology, chemistry and physics qualifications, the assessment of practical skills has been separated into two "elements".

- Those aspects such as planning, analysing data and evaluation, will be assessed indirectly in the written exam, constituting a minimum of 15% of the available marks.
- The practical skills and techniques relevant for each science will be assessed directly using the Common Practical Assessment Criteria (CPAC) in the practical endorsement. Each A level science specification incorporates a copy of the draft CPAC.

The practical endorsement will be reported separately to the overall grade, although the knowledge and understanding of the practical activities will support the questions in the written examinations which do contribute to that grade. The practical endorsement will be separately reported on the certificate with a straightforward pass or not classified (subject to confirmation after Ofqual's consultation).

Minimum documentary requirements

The assessment of the practical endorsement is undertaken by teachers as they directly observe students carrying out practical activities. The minimum documentary requirements that centres are required to maintain are:

- documented plans to carry out sufficient practical activities which meet the requirements of the CPAC, incorporating skills and techniques detailed, over the course of the A level
- a record of each practical activity undertaken and the date when this was completed
- a record of student attendance
- a record of the criteria being assessed in that practical activity
- a record of which student met the criteria and which did not
- student work showing evidence required for the particular task with date
- any associated materials provided for the practical activity e.g. written instructions given.

Quality Assurance

Quality assurance of the practical endorsement will be through visiting monitors from the awarding organisations. As the practical activities for the endorsement take place throughout the two years of the A level course, monitoring will also take place throughout the duration of first teaching of the course (i.e. visits could be in either the first or second year of the A level). Each centre will be monitored once during the two years in one of the sciences, with that visit being limited to one of the sciences, except for very large centres who will be monitored for all sciences. The monitor who visits will be appointed by the awarding organisation with which the centre has registered for the science selected for the visit.

There is a distinct difference between monitoring and moderation, particularly in that the monitoring process is not intended to moderate (adjust) individual candidates' results. Rather it is to ensure that the centre is applying the CPAC, implementing the procedures and maintaining records as required to fulfil the requirements of the practical endorsement, as laid down in the specification.

In the first year of teaching, monitoring will not take place until January 2016 and it will not take place during the summer examination period. In subsequent years monitoring can take place from September, as A level students are expected to have been undertaking work towards the practical endorsement and then continue until the start of the summer examination period.

What does this mean for centres?

In September 2015 (and each September thereafter), each centre should register details for each science detailing the awarding organisation whose specification they intend to deliver and the named lead teacher for each science. This process will be explained fully by all awarding organisations in due course.

Lead teachers will be required to undertake the training provided by their awarding organisation on the implementation of the practical endorsement. Further details will be supplied by the awarding organisations.

Lead teachers should then disseminate this information to all other teachers of that science within the centre so that each teacher can apply the standards appropriately across the range of candidates within the centre.

When a centre is selected for monitoring, the nominated monitor will contact the centre and liaise with the lead teacher for a visit with no less than two weeks' notice.

The centre visit

On the day of the centre visit the monitor will:

- observe practical activity taking place
- review the minimum documentary requirements
- review student records
- talk with staff and pupils.

Please note that the observation is to determine the centre's abilities to deliver and assess students as part of the practical endorsement, not to decide on students' competencies. It is therefore not necessary, and indeed could be counterproductive, to "rehearse" any practical work with the students before the visit.

After the visit:

The monitor will complete a record of the visit which will be copied to the centre. The record will state whether the monitor agrees with the centre's application of the common practical assessment criteria, or not.

Should the monitor not agree with the centre's application of the CPAC, then guidance will be given as to what measures are required to bring the centre into line with the requirements. Such an outcome will also require that the awarding organisations ensure that the CPAC are being applied correctly in the other sciences taught by the centre. This may require additional monitoring visits from their respective awarding organisations which may incur additional charges for centres outside England.

It is possible that the monitor may agree with the centre's application of the CPAC, yet still include guidance on improvements which could be made to the delivery of practical work in biology, chemistry or physics or to any organisational aspects of the practical endorsement.

What if we disagree with the monitor?

Should a centre dispute the outcome of a monitoring visit, a repeat visit by an alternative monitor may be requested. The process for this will be confirmed by each awarding organisation.

What do I need to do next?

- When you receive details of how to register, enter details for the awarding organisation and lead teacher (for each science) by the end of September 2015.
Note that this registration does not incur a cost and does not commit you to a specific awarding organisation for your final entries, which would be expected to be made in February 2017.
- Arrange for lead teachers to undertake training in the Autumn term.
- Put the minimum documentary requirements, as detailed above, into place.

These are the arrangements jointly agreed by all four awarding organisations. Each awarding organisation will provide more detailed guidance and updated specifications following the Ofqual consultation.

If you have any queries regarding the content of this letter please contact your chosen awarding organisation for clarification.

OCR: www.ocr.org.uk/positiveaboutpractical

Pearson: <https://qualifications.pearson.com/en/home.html>

AQA: www.aqa.org.uk

Eduqas: www.eduqas.org.uk