

OCR review into Cambridge Technicals results in summer 2022

Key findings and recommendations

These are the key findings and recommendations of an internal OCR review in response to delays in issuing results to some students for OCR's Cambridge Technicals qualifications in summer 2022, when students returned to in-person exams while many Covid adaptations remained in place. This review sets out what happened, identifies the root causes and makes important recommendations for ensuring the issue of timely Cambridge Technical results to all students in the future.

This review was carried out by OCR staff and overseen by an independent Chair, Professor Graham Virgo KC (Hon) of the University of Cambridge.

OCR has accepted all the recommendations and has begun to implement them.



Preface by Jill Duffy

When things go wrong with students' results, it is vital that we learn, improve and do everything we can to avoid it happening again.

I know first-hand from the calls I had with students, parents and teachers this summer, that delays in delivering some Cambridge Technicals results caused additional stress and anxiety at what was already a challenging time. I am truly sorry for that.

This review rightly holds us to account. It pinpoints what went wrong this summer, and it takes a pragmatic approach to identifying improvements that will not only prevent a recurrence, but improve the wider experience for students, parents, schools and colleges. I accept its findings in full. I am grateful to Professor Graham Virgo and to my OCR colleagues for their rigorous, challenging and constructive work on this review.

We are already working at pace, in consultation with schools and colleges, to implement these recommendations. I am determined that we will do so and, above all, prevent any repeat of this summer's problems. Throughout we will put students first.

OCR's Cambridge Technicals have grown in uptake over the years, providing many tens of thousands of students with engaging programmes that deliver the skills and knowledge needed to progress to further and higher education and to employment. These are valuable qualifications and the students who study them are rightly proud of their achievements. When I meet Cambridge Technical students I am always inspired by their enthusiasm, self-evident skills, and their sheer hard work and commitment. They must be at the heart of what we do, and it is with them in mind that we will and must deliver on the findings of this review.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jill Duffy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Chief Executive Officer, OCR

Introduction by Professor Graham Virgo KC (Hon)



In the course of this review, I have met with a number of staff members from OCR. I have been impressed by their engagement and thoughtfulness about what happened in August 2022 as regards delays to the issuing of results for a significant number of students and the changes which need to be made. They have all acknowledged the distress and uncertainty suffered by students and their families, who did not receive the full results by the date they were expecting, as well as those working in schools and colleges. I have heard many examples of how hard staff at OCR worked to resolve the situation. I am grateful for everything they did. But students are at the heart of the system and we need to acknowledge the impact on them.

Cambridge Technicals have been designed to ensure significant flexibility to meet the needs of students taking these qualifications. But with this flexibility comes complexity. In considering the recommendations from this review it has been important to ensure that the core flexibility is retained, but it follows that the processes for submitting work and confirming grades are inevitably more complex than for other qualifications. For this reason, and because of the need to work with a large number of different stakeholders, it follows that it is not possible to commit OCR to guarantee that no student's result will ever be delayed. What I do want to see, and I have been impressed by how this has resonated with staff, is an unwavering commitment to put the necessary systems and processes in place to identify missing and incomplete results in good time, so that students get their results when they are expecting them. It is also clear that, as Cambridge Technicals continue to develop, there needs to be renewed focus on ensuring simplicity of structure and process.

In the course of discussions with representatives of schools and colleges it has sometimes been suggested to me that there is a perception of a lack of parity of esteem of Cambridge Technical qualifications with academic qualifications. But it is clear to me that OCR is fully committed to vocational qualifications and there is clear desire to ensure that there is indeed a parity of esteem between different qualifications.

In the course of overseeing this review I have been struck by the complexity of the examination system facing schools and colleges, with exams officers having to deal with large numbers of awarding organisations with different requirements and different deadlines. Given the scope of this review, the recommendations only refer to OCR, but I would urge all awarding organisations through the Joint Council for Qualifications and the Federation of Awarding Bodies to work in a spirit of co-operation to minimise unnecessary differences in operations.

I am particularly grateful to the various members of staff from OCR and representatives of schools and colleges who met with me during this review. I consider that the implementation of the recommendations in this review will serve to ensure that Cambridge Technicals continue to be valuable qualifications for the students who take them.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Graham Virgo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Professor Graham Virgo KC (Hon)

What happened

On 17 August 2022, the same day that A Level results were released under embargo, OCR released results for Cambridge Technicals to schools and colleges. These were results where OCR could verify that students (via their schools and colleges) had achieved the requirements. At this stage, it was not apparent that there were delays to a significant number of results. However, schools and colleges began to contact OCR on 17 and 18 August with concerns about students who were expecting results which had not been issued or which were incomplete.

As problems became apparent on 17 and 18 August, OCR mobilised a large team to process results, support students, schools and colleges, and liaise with UCAS and universities, prioritising those students with higher education places at stake.

By 18 August 2022, about 39,000 Cambridge Technicals students received their results on time and as expected. 4,572 students did not receive a result on results day and, of these Level 2 and Level 3 qualification results, 1,663 were expecting their results in order to progress to higher education. The vast majority of such results were delivered within a week, though some complex cases took until 7 September. As far as this review can establish, no student missed out on a university place as a result of the delays.

In almost all cases of delayed results, OCR had not received the full details needed to process qualifications from schools and colleges for those students. The causes of this are detailed below.

Why it happened

The academic year 2021/2022 was an extraordinary period for schools and colleges and awarding organisations. In some ways it was the most challenging year since the start of the pandemic.

The return to formal approaches to assessment, including traditional exams as well as non-exam assessment, combined with novel approaches to assessment, such as Covid adaptations (see Adaptations opposite), and the need to run contingencies (e.g. the collection of evidence if teacher assessed grades were needed) created a vast amount of additional work for schools and colleges.

These challenges stretched workforces in schools and colleges and awarding organisations that had been under sustained pressure from extraordinary ways of working for over two years. Many staff had not run processes at scale (e.g. a summer series) since 2019 or had new staff in post that had never run such processes.

This context accentuated delays in issuing some results. However, it is important to go beyond this context to identify root causes. This is essential if OCR and other boards are to avoid issues in 2023 and beyond, given the role that adaptations will continue to play alongside the pressures of the current economic environment in schools and colleges.

Adaptations

The following adaptations were in place to enable students taking vocational qualifications to achieve results that were comparable to those of students taking general qualifications. These all required schools and colleges to provide additional information for OCR to generate results for their students.

1. Reduction in assessment of moderated coursework units:

- all content must be taught, but under some circumstances full assessment of a selected unit was not required
- OCR calculated an assessed grade based on the results of their completed units

2. Unit teacher assessed grades (TAGs) from 2020/21:

- a unit grade submitted by a teacher based on evidence available to them of a student's performance which may be incomplete due to school closures or other Covid impacts

3. Dispensation to allow assessed grades for examinations in January 2021 and January 2022:

- students who were unable to sit their scheduled January exams due to high Covid rates were able to receive an assessed grade should they not have had sufficient teaching time to prepare for a future exam, and/or were unable to sit the exam as scheduled.

Causes and recommendations

The delays were partly caused by the continued use of a wide range of Covid adaptations introduced at various points during the years leading up to summer 2022. These intersected with:

- the flexible, unit-based design of these qualifications and the necessarily complex processes that underpinned them
- a need for greater data sharing between OCR, schools, colleges and UCAS than was provided by existing processes
- communications and guidance to schools and colleges that did not always reach, or was insufficiently understood by, those who needed to know how to handle the complex processes for claiming results
- a significant increase in 'missing and incomplete results' that put pressure on the process
- an overstretched workforce, both in schools and colleges and within OCR and challenges to governance and risk management at a time of significant change.

OCR could prevent a recurrence and strengthen resilience to future shocks, challenges and problems by undertaking reforms in the following areas:

- collecting and sharing data with schools, colleges and UCAS, including exploring an earlier restricted (embargoed) release of results
- improving communications with schools and colleges
- strengthening relationships with schools and colleges
- reviewing governance and risk management
- building the internal capacity and resource to support Cambridge Technicals in the summer.

Further details on these root causes and recommended reforms, improvements and changes follow.

Collecting and sharing data with schools, colleges and UCAS

Cambridge Technicals are unit based. The units that make up these qualifications can be claimed in any order and throughout the course and academic year – not just on a single results day. This flexible design brings benefits for students – they can take different combinations of units to reflect a particular specialism or pathway and can complete the qualification at their own pace.

However, with this flexibility comes significant complexity, which impacted on the resilience of the results process when combined with the introduction of a range of adaptations introduced in response to the impact of the pandemic.

OCR has no visibility of when students are expecting to receive a full Cambridge Technicals qualification. Although initial registration information is collected, OCR's processes leave it open to schools or colleges to claim the range of units each student has achieved. This is to allow for the fact that, regardless of original intention, some students may only achieve some units, may leave a programme, may switch learning aims to another programme part way through their course, or may be on a programme that does not follow an academic year (so that results day in August is not relevant to them). OCR lacked the data to identify students who were expecting full results on results day but who had not received them. It was not possible, therefore, to identify in advance and then query instances where a school or college had not submitted all the units required to make up a full qualification.

Recommendations

There needs to be a strong focus on collecting and sharing data about Cambridge Technicals throughout the academic year. This will allow OCR to have more data on students and their intended qualification outcomes and schools and colleges to have more ongoing information on the status of their students' achievements.

Specifically, OCR should:

- **collect student registrations early in the calendar year and collect the target completion aims separately**
- **create an accessible and user-friendly portal** which provides schools and colleges with information about their Cambridge Technical students and their progress towards their intended qualification

- **provide a candidate achievement report or 'checkpoint'** to schools and colleges by the end of June, asking schools and colleges to check and amend this before the end of the summer term
- explore the value of **issuing results under embargo for Cambridge Technicals earlier than 'restricted release of results' for A Levels** to give them time to check that all the results they were expecting are available
- **improve data sharing arrangements with UCAS** so OCR has visibility of those students who are expecting a Cambridge Technical result and need their results for progression into higher education.

Improving communications and targeted guidance for schools and colleges

OCR communicated with schools and colleges on a regular basis and received positive feedback on the quality and effectiveness of these communications, including from schools and colleges, as well as stakeholders stating that they valued the quality and range of OCR's communications and support.

However, it is clear that for many of the schools and colleges with incomplete results, some key individuals within those institutions, often within a particular subject department, did not always pick up on the information provided. It is always challenging to reach subject teachers who are extremely busy and receive a wide range of communications from many sources outside those from OCR and other awarding organisations. In hindsight there was a need for additional approaches to strengthen and target specific communications to reach subject teachers.

Recommendations

OCR should:

- **review the effectiveness of its communications** with appropriate audiences in schools and colleges in a differentiated way for exams officers, teachers and senior leadership teams, but also to look at how OCR emphasises in its communications the importance of each audience working with their colleagues across a school or college. With better data, it will be possible to have more bespoke communications
- **strengthen ways of evaluating the impact and effectiveness of communications** about Cambridge Technicals results. OCR should look at how it reaches each department and relevant teacher as far as possible
- **support targeted staff within schools and colleges** to meet deadlines for when student data must be submitted.

Strengthening relationships with schools and colleges

The evidence shows that OCR worked effectively in collaboration with schools and colleges to support them in conducting assessments and to quality assure their assessments. Although OCR was able to issue about 39,000 complete results by results day, the number of incomplete unit claims suggests the complexities introduced as part of the Covid adaptations were asking too much of some schools and colleges.

Recommendations

OCR should:

- ensure that contact with schools and colleges includes **checking how prepared they are for receiving and issuing results**
- review and **enhance proactive telephone campaigns** to follow up key customer communications to schools and colleges
- make **greater use of existing forums and networks involving teachers** to explain processes and their importance
- strengthen the approach to securing **emergency contact details** from schools and colleges, in conjunction with the Joint Council for Qualifications
- **strengthen the approach to stakeholder engagement** to ensure that expert feedback is available from representative bodies on issues relating to the management of Cambridge Technicals.

Reviewing governance and risk management

Many risks associated with the pandemic adaptations related to Cambridge Technicals were managed effectively; however, there were some risks which were partially mitigated or not identified. While OCR did a lot of work on scenario planning as part of series readiness, this work did not join up enough with the residual risks on OCR's risk register.

OCR's approach to risk identification and management was overly focused on preventative controls to stop risks from happening and did not give sufficient focus to mitigating actions for scenarios where risks might crystallise into issues. OCR's missing and incomplete results process was not designed to work at this scale from the perspective of systems and processes. OCR's risk controls for its processes need to extend beyond its systems to include a greater focus on data and people to ensure OCR has the resilience required to cope with multiple issues happening at scale at the same time.

Recommendations

OCR should:

- **embed Cambridge Technicals results risk management more deeply into existing forums** for reviewing readiness planning and lessons learned
- more regularly **review the risks for Cambridge Technicals on risk logs**
- further enhance liaison with the DfE, Ofqual and other awarding organisations to ensure there is effective **cross-sector identification of risks and issues** especially from the perspective of schools and colleges where these relate to similar issues to those relevant to Cambridge Technicals.

Building the internal capacity and resource to support Cambridge Technicals

OCR has a flexible and expert workforce as is demonstrated by the way in which it was able to repurpose staff to respond to delays in results. OCR staff are clearly committed, but there were many demands on their time for an incident of such scale and complexity. During the incident staff worked long hours and with huge commitment to resolve issues on behalf of the students affected, which was their primary concern and source of motivation. It may be that OCR should have trained some of its staff before results day as a contingency for the risks associated with issuing Cambridge Technical results. This would have given OCR more resilience in the short term ahead of longer-term changes to simplify the design and supporting processes for Cambridge Technicals.

Recommendations

OCR should:

- conduct a **review of staff expertise and resource available for supporting Cambridge Technicals** in the summer
- **train additional internal staff** so that there are more staff able to work with schools and colleges if more capacity is needed for the summer 2023 series. This would act as a short-term contingency for mitigating the risks associated with issuing Cambridge Technical results as a result of the Covid adaptations
- **Use all the lessons from the challenges with issuing Cambridge Technicals results in summer 2022 to fully inform the design of its planned new Cambridge Technical qualifications** – the current Cambridge Technicals are to be fully revised in line with government policy reforms for first teaching in summer 2025.

About Cambridge Technicals

Cambridge Technicals are vocational qualifications available at Level 2 and Level 3 for students aged 16+. They develop practical skills and knowledge with progression to employment or further study in mind. They are available in a range of subjects, including Business, Engineering, Health and Social Care, Applied Science, and IT. The Level 3 qualifications carry UCAS points and many students go on to university or follow a variety of other progression routes such as apprenticeships, with Cambridge Technicals.

They appeal to students with both vocational and academic interests, often alongside A Levels. They are highly rigorous, involving external exams as well as a variety of coursework.

Cambridge Technicals students go on to enter high quality apprenticeships and employment, including with the UK's top employers, or enter university, including some of the most competitive institutions and courses.

Tens of thousands of students are awarded Cambridge Technicals each year at 1,100 schools and colleges.

Find out more

www.ocr.org.uk

or call our Customer Support Centre on **01223 553998**

Alternatively, you can email us on **support@ocr.org.uk**



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