



Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

LEAVING CERTIFICATE 2021

CANDIDATE INFORMATION GUIDE

**A Short Guide to the Accredited Grades Data Collection,
National Standardisation and Quality Assurance Processes.**

August 2021

KEY RESULTS, VIEWING AND APPEAL DATES 2021

SERVICE	IN SCHOOLS	CANDIDATE SELF SERVICE PORTAL
Leaving Certificate Results	10 am Friday 3 September – Schools Examination Portal Schools will also receive a report by post	10 am Friday 3 September
Access to Data - You will receive (as applicable): a. Written examinations component marks and final marks b. Accredited Grades estimated marks and accredited marks		5 pm From Tuesday 7 September
Application to View Scripts		Opens: 5 pm Tuesday 7 September Closes: 8 pm Wednesday 8 September
Viewing of Scripts	Scripts Marked on Paper You will be assigned to 1 of 3 sessions on Saturday 11 September Session 1: 9 am – 11am Session 2: 12 pm – 2 pm Session 3: 3 pm – 5 pm Schools will have the option of an additional session on the morning of Sunday 12 September	Scripts Marked Online Online access to view from 9 am on Saturday 11 September
Appeal Application		Opens: 9 am, Saturday 11 September Closes: 12 pm Monday 13 September
Appeals Results For both the Accredited Grades and State Examinations appeals	Schools Portal date to be confirmed	Candidate Portal only - Date to be Confirmed

There are tight timelines this year for candidates to apply to view scripts and to lodge their appeal applications. These timelines are essential to ensure that the remaining stages of the appeal process can be completed as quickly as possible

Until such time as the number of appeals is known, it is not possible to commit to a specific timeframe for the issue of the appeal results.

A detailed *Candidate Information Guide on Results and Appeals* will issue in advance of **Results Day**.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this Guide is to provide candidates at the 2021 Leaving Certificate with further information about the system of Accredited Grades.

Page one of this Guide includes the timetable for accessing more detailed information about the provisional results; the dates for applying to view scripts; the dates of viewing scripts; and the deadline for making an appeal application. This is the first time that candidates have been provided with this information.

The choices available to candidates in relation to their Leaving Certificate this year recognised that it would be unfair to have candidates rely entirely on the examinations as the sole means of assessment for their Leaving Certificate qualification in 2021.

Candidates have had the choice of sitting examinations, receiving Accredited Grades, or both, on a subject by subject basis. This is the case in the three Leaving Certificate programmes; the Leaving Certificate Applied programme; the Leaving Certificate Vocational programme as well as the established Leaving Certificate. The references to 'Leaving Certificate' throughout this guide refer to all three programmes unless stated otherwise.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has provided a number of opportunities for candidates to be provided with Accredited Grades this year. Eligible Candidates who had not opted for Accredited Grades were provided with a final opportunity to update their choices and each subject was updated to opt-in to the system of Accredited Grades. Eligible candidates were given the option to notify the SEC by 11 August, if they did not want to receive the Accredited Grade option. The SEC believes that providing a default option for candidates to receive Accredited Grades was the fairest approach, ensuring that they had the opportunity to have any estimated marks provided for then considered, so that they receive the best possible Leaving Certificate available to them.

The system of Accredited Grades is being run by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) following legislation that has been specifically enacted for this purpose. The SEC also has responsibility for the delivery of the examinations and is operating both processes as two entirely independent processes. The SEC will strive to operate the system of Accredited Grades as it does the examinations each year and provide that all aspects of the 2021 Leaving Certificate are of the highest quality, and that candidates are treated fairly and equitably.

No Link Between Performance in the Examinations and Accredited Grades

There is no link between examinations performance and Accredited Grades either at an individual candidate level or at the overall system level. The examination results and the Accredited Grades will be brought together only for the purposes of determining the better result for those candidates who have opted for both.

Results Day, Marking of Examinations and Accredited Grades Process

The Leaving Certificate results are due for issue on Friday 3 September.

Detailed information about the approach to marking the examinations this year has already been provided in the *Leaving Certificate Candidate Information Guide 2021 – Preparing for Examinations* which issued in advance of the examinations and which is available [here](#).

At this time, in relation to the Accredited Grades, all of the data required has been collected from schools, and the standardisation process is being developed and refined using the statistical model from 2020 as the starting point.

Enquiries

Current information on all matters relating to Leaving Certificate examinations and the Accredited Grades process will be available on an ongoing basis on www.gov.ie/LeavingCertificate.

Enquiries about Accredited Grades can be e-mailed to accreditedgrades@examinations.ie.

The State Examinations Commission can also be contacted by phone at 0906442702.

2. Collection of Candidate Data

In-School Candidates Studying Subjects in School

The first stage in this system was to be able to base the Accredited Grades on information from schools about candidates' expected performance in the Leaving Certificate examinations. Schools were asked to provide their best possible estimate of how each candidate was likely to perform in the adjusted examinations that were put in place for 2021, and based on the level of achievement that the candidate has been demonstrating.

While the school data will be subject to adjustment in the national standardisation process, it forms the basis for the Accredited Grades, so a lot of time and effort was spent in seeking to get this part right.

The approach taken centres on research which tells us that teachers are good at making accurate judgements of their students' performance in the context of their schools and experience but less accurate at aligning them to external standards. That is, they are good at assessing student's performance relative to that of others in the group and relative to other students they have taught, but not as good at aligning those judgments to an external objective standard. That is why standardisation is required.

Very clear and comprehensive guidance and support was provided in order that schools could provide their students with the fairest possible estimate of their likely performance in the Leaving Certificate. In arriving at the estimated percentage marks, there were three main school-based steps:

- The teacher's estimation of percentage marks for each candidate in each subject;
- School alignment of marks for a subject through a subject alignment group comprising teachers who are teaching the subject to Leaving Certificate candidates this year;
- Oversight of the alignment process by the school principal.

The main purpose of the alignment process is to ensure that all teachers who are providing estimated percentage marks in respect of the same subject in the school are applying standards that are appropriate and are consistent with each other when doing so. This was the only sound means to achieve fairness across different class groups taking the same subject within a school, so this was a very important part of the process. Specific guidance was also provided on recognising and avoiding unconscious bias that might affect the estimates.

Following these three steps, the estimated marks were transmitted for national standardisation using an online data collection system.

Out of School Learners and In-School Candidates Studying Subjects Out of School

There was a separate process for candidates who are out of school learners, or in-school candidates taking one or more subjects outside of the school, to apply to be considered for the provision of an estimated mark.

The arrangements that were in place this year for these categories of learner ensured that all candidates had the opportunity to be considered for an Accredited Grade. That is not to say that all candidates in these categories were provided with an estimated mark on which an Accredited Grade can be based. For reasons of equity and fairness to all candidates, there were conditions of eligibility and a requirement to provide evidence of learning and attainment.

Other than in the non-curricular language subjects, these arrangements required candidates in these categories to make a connection with a school and for a panel of registered teachers in the school to review the available evidence and to provide an estimated mark based on the evidence. Schools were also required to issue decisions to candidates to whom it was not possible to provide an estimated percentage mark. A very small number of appeals against decisions not to provide an estimated mark were processed and were concluded.

Schools transmitted the marks for those candidates in these categories who were linked to their school, using the online data collection system. This data is now subject to national standardisation.

Candidates Taking the Non-Curricular Languages Subjects

Candidates taking one of the 18 non-curricular language subjects (e.g. Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, etc). had the opportunity to take a proficiency assessment last May which formed the basis of their estimated mark. The proficiency assessment was organised and assessed by the Department of Education. The estimated marks for candidates who sat the proficiency assessment have been entered into the standardisation system and are being processed.

The process of data collection in regard to estimated marks for this category of learner has concluded and the data is now subject to national standardisation.

3. Data Collection

Checks and balances in the data collection system ensured that the data was entered correctly and accurately by schools. A robust and rigorous quality assurance process has been carried out on the data by the Department of Education and the SEC on receipt and in subsequent processing.

Further checking has taken place, which included sampling some of the completed paperwork from randomly selected schools to ensure accuracy.

At this point in time, all of the available data is being processed by the SEC. The Accredited Grades statistical model is being developed in collaboration with an externally contracted agency with international expertise in this area – Educational Testing Service (ETS). See section 4 below. ETS has been awarded the contract to design this year's accredited grades process for Leaving Certificate students. The system is based on the same model as was used for Calculated Grades in 2020, although some potential refinements to that model are being explored.

The system has been rebuilt for 2021, using new computer code, and additional quality assurance checks have been put in place. See section 9 below.

4. Status of the 2021 Leaving Certificate

This year, the Leaving Certificate results comprise the results of the examinations and the Accredited Grades.

The provisional statements of results and the final certificates will not distinguish examinations results from Accredited Grades. Candidates and schools will have access to information as to whether the final result awarded was from an examination or an Accredited Grade. This information which will be provided shortly after the issue of the provisional results on 3 September.

The examinations will be marked to a national standard and the Accredited Grades will be subject to the national standardisation process undertaken by the SEC. The Leaving Certificate results from any one year are considered equivalent to the results from any other year and the 2021 Leaving Certificate results will have equal standing.

5. National Standardisation of Accredited Grades

Process of National Standardisation to Ensure Fairness

Research makes clear that because teacher judgements are made in the context of each school, they need to be examined and adjusted at a national level to achieve as much comparability as possible across schools in the standards that are applied. The estimated percentage marks will be combined with recent national data through a process called standardisation in order to generate the SEC Accredited Grade for the candidates in the subject.

This year, the focus of national standardisation of the Accredited Grades, as it was in the 2020 system of Calculated Grades, will be on bringing schools into line with each other to ensure as much fairness as possible amongst this year's candidates.

This standardisation process will seek to mitigate the effects that can arise from different schools, despite their best efforts, applying different standards in their estimation.

While the school-based estimates may move upwards or downwards, candidates who received a higher estimated percentage mark than a classmate will not receive a mark that is lower than that classmate after standardisation.

By collecting and using a range of different types of information, the different sources of data complement each other, to provide the most accurate and fair set of results within the limitations of the available data.

As the school data is more accurate at assessing candidates relative to each other than to any objective standard shared across schools, the final marks provided to candidates following the process of standardisation, for any subject and level, may be higher or lower than the estimates provided by the school.

Data that are used and not used in the Standardisation Process

The standardisation process will not use historical school by school data on past performance in Leaving Certificate Examinations.

The national standardisation process will use the range of Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate historical data at national level to determine the particular distributions of results that are most likely for any given group of candidates taking a particular subject at a particular level.

At school and national level, Junior Cycle examination results are strong predictors of Leaving Certificate performance but are not so good at estimating individual candidate performance. This is why, for school-based candidates who are part of a class group, an individual candidate's Junior Cycle results will not be used to directly feed into that individual's Accredited Grade. Each individual candidate's results will only contribute to the information about the whole class. The Junior Cycle data will be used in the model to produce a distribution of the likely performance of the particular group of candidates taking each subject at each level in each school. The use of aggregated group level data means individual candidates need not be concerned if they did not complete the Junior Cycle, or that they were exempt from Irish in these examinations.

The Statistical Model used in the National Standardisation Process:

These distributions will provide a pattern of expected results for the school group at each subject and level. The school-based estimates will also provide a pattern of expected results for the school group at each subject and level. This school-based data provides valuable candidate-specific information and the Junior-Cycle data provides valuable group-level information.

No one distribution of expected results on its own will determine the Accredited Grades, as the model will combine the distributions to generate the grades in a way which is as reasonable, fair and accurate to candidates as possible. While the school-based estimates may move upwards or downwards as a result of the standardisation process, the position of candidates relative to each other, as indicated by the estimated marks provided by the school, will not be changed. The fact that the distribution of results is not based entirely on any one data set, but capitalises on the distinct strengths of each source of information, contributes to accuracy and fairness in the model.

The statistical process takes account of whether the group of candidates taking a subject in the school this year is academically stronger (or weaker) than any other group of candidates in any other school or from any other year. This means that the distribution of grades emerging from the school is not pre-ordained to be the same as it was before or to be the same as the distribution of grades in any other school.

How the Model Ensures Fairness for Higher and Lower Performing Candidates:

The model does not impose any predetermined score on any individual in a class or in a school. Provided the school has accurately reflected the relative differences between candidates within the class, there will be no barrier to any excellent candidate achieving high grades in any school. For example, if there is a high-performing candidate within a class of low-performing candidates, provided the school has identified the atypically high performing candidate, they will be dealt with appropriately.

Even if the standardisation process shifts the marks upwards (or downwards) for the entire class, the calculation process within the model will take account of the relative standing of the candidate within the class, as set out in the school-based data, and will allow the estimates for the group as a whole to be properly realigned, if necessary, without losing this information about the degree to which this high-performing candidate exceeds the norm. The same will apply at the lower end of performance.

6. Validation of the Model

To ensure that the statistical model is behaving as expected, and is achieving its objectives, there needs to be a related process of model validation. The workings of the statistical model will be reviewed and validated in a number of ways.

Use of Demographic Characteristics to Check the Outcomes of the Model

There will be a review of the outcomes using a number of different demographic characteristics which will include gender and socio-economic status. This is to ensure that the model is presenting outcomes that are as fair and equitable as possible given its constraints, and in line with previous outcomes as much as is possible. It is important to note that the demographic characteristics are only used to validate the model; they are not used to determine the Accredited Grades.

The purpose of the Accredited Grades system is to get as accurate an estimate as is feasible of the grade that each candidate would have achieved if they had proceeded to take their examinations. The validation process will check to see if the interactions between the demographic characteristics mentioned above and the Accredited Grades results are similar to the interactions in the historical data between these characteristics and examination results. For example, in the case of gender, if the performance of female candidates relative to male candidates in various subjects turns out to be similar under the Accredited Grades model as was normally the case in previous examination years, then this can be taken as an indicator that the Accredited Grades model is in line with previous years in relation to this.

The purpose of this review of the outcomes of the statistical model is to check whether the Accredited Grades model is resulting in any particular group being advantaged or disadvantaged relative to what occurred in other years. It is important to note that this assessment is being made relative to previous years; the validation will check, for example, whether or not disadvantage effects, or gender effects, are exacerbated within the model. It is also important to note that, because the system has been deliberately made blind to these demographic indicators, it will not correct for relative biases that are internal to the sets of estimates provided by individual schools. Schools should have resolved the issue of any unconscious bias within their own estimating process. This was advised in the Guidance to Schools.

7. Management and Oversight of the System of Accredited Grades.

Development of the Statistical Model

The statistical model is being developed for the SEC by Educational Testing Service (ETS). ETS is a world leading US-based non-profit organisation that specialises in educational measurement. ETS has been working with the Department of Education and the State

Examinations Commission (SEC) to deliver the various elements of the standardisation model and the implementation of the standardisation process. The combination of historical data sets and the data collected from schools will be processed through the statistical model. However, there is also a significant level of human intervention required to be able to stand over the statistical model and to approve the issue of the Accredited Grades to candidates.

Oversight of the National Standardisation Process

The national standardisation process is being undertaken by a technical team and overseen by a Management Group for Standardisation in the State Examinations Commission.

Those involved have extensive expertise in the field of high stakes examinations and assessment, educational evaluation, and second level education and were also central to the development of the system of Accredited Grades for 2021. Work is ongoing on the analysis and review of various potential refinements to the model used in 2020. National distributions, which range across 79 Leaving Certificate curricular subjects and levels, 18 non-curricular languages and approximately 20 Leaving Certificate Applied subjects and tasks will be reviewed for 2021, as well as against the historical national data.

8. Quality Assurance

In the Accredited Grades system, the UK-based National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been contracted to provide comprehensive quality assurance of the system of Accredited Grades and is undertaking checks on the coding of the statistical model as well as data verification and integrity of the data processing and standardisation processes. NFER, an independent, not-for-profit organisation, has expertise in the conduct of independent research, assessment and evaluation studies; and in the development and provision of tests to schools.

In approving the issue of the Leaving Certificate examination results each year, the Commissioners of the SEC provide assurance about the fairness, accuracy, quality and integrity of the outcomes following the marking and resulting processes. This year, the Commissioners will approve the issue of the Leaving Certificate results comprising both the examinations and the Accredited Grades.