

Summer report 2015



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Introduction

This is the second year we have reported in detail on the summer GCSE, AS and A level exam series and similar qualifications used as alternatives.¹ The report includes a commentary on issues that routinely arise during a summer exam series and on issues that were specific to 2015.

During summer 2015, 2.1 million students sat around 1,700² exams, which generated 22 million scripts that were assessed by 55,000 examiners and led to 8 million awards. It is important to each student and to everyone who relies on the qualifications that the system works well. Assessments must be ready on time, students must be given the right papers, the papers must not contain unacceptable errors and must test the right things, marking must be sufficiently accurate and standards must be aligned between exam boards in each subject and over time. Much of our work focuses on making sure exam boards take steps to make sure the exam series is successful and reduce the risk of things going wrong. We also require that, where problems do arise, exam boards deal with them in a fair and consistent way.

A small number of exam boards provide the qualifications that are the focus of this report: AQA, Cambridge International, International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), OCR, Pearson and WJEC.

We hold regular meetings with exam boards, individually and collectively, throughout the year to identify risks and issues, exchange information, and receive regular updates from them. We focus on different issues according to the time of year, including the recruitment of examiners, scheduling of standardisation and awarding meetings, marking progress and enquiries about results.

During the delivery of exams we require exam boards to tell us about any issues³ that might have a negative impact on students, standards or public confidence and how

¹ For example, Level 1/2 Certificates (including Cambridge IGCSEs), and Level 3 Other general qualifications (such as International Baccalaureate Diplomas)

² This figure has been collated manually.

³ Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461218/general-conditions-of-recognition-september-2015.pdf define an Adverse Effect as follows.

An act, omission, event, incident, or circumstance has an Adverse Effect if it –

(a) gives rise to prejudice to Learners or potential Learners, or

(b) adversely affects –

(i) the ability of the awarding organisation to undertake the development, delivery or award of qualifications in accordance with its Conditions of Recognition

(ii) the standards of qualifications which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, or public confidence in qualifications

they are dealing with them. We routinely monitor the setting of standards in GCSE, AS and A level and we also monitor a number of other qualifications used as alternatives to these.

GCSEs

Most of the GCSEs taken and awarded in 2015 were established qualifications and there were very few changes. This was the second year in which all the GCSEs taken in England were linear, in that students had to take all their exams at the end of the course. GCSEs in English literature and history were changed for summer 2015, to improve coverage of the whole curriculum.

In August we published a brief explanation of the results⁴ as well as information about school level variation in results.⁵

Level 1/2 Certificates and International GCSEs

Some schools enter their students for qualifications that are similar to GCSEs, in some or all subjects. The largest entry subject, in England, is English language. The number of students taking Cambridge International's IGCSE⁶ First language English almost doubled in 2015 to over 200,000. In view of the size of this entry, we took particular interest in the way this qualification was awarded. We report on our findings later in this report.

AS and A levels

There were no changes to AS and A level qualifications awarded in 2015. In August we published a brief explanation of the results⁷ and information about school level variation in results.⁸

Pre-U/International Baccalaureate

There were no changes to these qualifications, which are taken by some students alongside or as an alternative to AS and A levels.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/summer-2015-gcse-results-a-brief-explanation>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/variability-in-gcse-results-2012-to-2015>

⁶ @IGCSE is the registered trademark of Cambridge International Examinations

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/summer-2015-as-and-a-level-results-a-brief-explanation>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/variability-in-a-level-results-2012-to-2015>

Exam preparation

We regularly meet with the exam boards throughout the year to understand any particular risks with which they might be dealing and to consider whether they are managing those risks properly. In particular, we consider examiner recruitment; systems and processes and any qualifications where we can foresee there may be issues at awarding.

We wrote to the exam boards at the beginning of the summer series to explain our regulatory approach (see Annex 1), and we also set out our expectations for this summer to the public in an open letter⁹.

Exam entries

Schools and colleges are responsible for submitting entries to exam boards on behalf of their students. Each exam board publishes a deadline by which entries have to be made. If an entry is made after the deadline it is classed as late and may be subject to an additional charge.

In November we published statistics on the number of entries and late entries for GCSE, AS and A level in the 2014/15 academic year.¹⁰ GCSEs and AS/A levels saw small decreases in the overall entries (down 1.4 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively).

Question paper errors

Exam boards start writing question papers a year or more before the exam series in which the paper is taken. We require exam boards to produce question papers and supporting materials that are clear, fair, and enable students to demonstrate the extent of their knowledge, skills and understanding which is required for the qualification.

In 2015, 1,302 exam papers and supporting materials were developed for GCSEs, and 1,672 exam papers and supporting materials were developed for AS and A level.

It is important that question papers and supporting materials are accurate. However mistakes are sometimes made. If a mistake is not picked up during the exam board's quality control process but is picked up before the paper is sat, the exam board will issue a correction or erratum notice to schools. This will explain the error and give instructions about any actions they and their students should take to avoid any negative impact.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-letter-summer-2015-gcses-igcses-as-and-a-levels>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entries-and-late-entries-for-gcse-and-a-level-201415-academic-year>

Occasionally a mistake is not identified until after the exam has started. This can be very serious. We require exam boards to tell us of any mistake that could affect students, standards or public confidence and to categorise any such errors according to their likely impact.

The categories of errors are as follows.

Category 1 - errors that make a question impossible to answer, either as a result of the way the question is constructed or set out, or as a result of a printing error which would mean parts of the paper are unavailable to students.

Category 2 - errors that may cause unintentional difficulties for students when answering the question.

Category 3 - minor issues such as grammatical mistakes and typos that do not affect a student's ability to answer the question.

We have summarised in table 1 below the number and nature of the errors that occurred in 2015 compared with 2014. The number of errors remains very small and therefore it is difficult to draw any conclusions from any increases or decreases.

Table 1: Question paper errors reported to us, by category of error and exam board

| Reported question paper errors | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|------------|----------|------------|----------|------------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Category 1 | | Category 2 | | Category 3 | | Total | |
| | 2014 | 2015 | 2014 | 2015 | 2014 | 2015 | 2014 | 2015 |
| AQA | 0 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 |
| Cambridge International | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| IBO | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 1 |
| OCR | 1 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 9 | 3 |
| Pearson | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 2 |
| WJEC | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 4 | 5 | 15 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 20 | 10 |

When a question paper is found to contain an error, exam boards review whether there is any evidence that students have been affected. They do this by manually reviewing students' answers and/or by analysing statistical data showing how the

students performed on the questions. In the category 2 errors, there was no evidence of an impact of the students' ability to answer the affected questions.

The following category 1 errors were found to have had some impact on students' performance and the exam boards took action to minimise, as far as possible, any unfair advantage or disadvantage.

AQA – GCSE Geography

Some pages were in the wrong order and some text was smudged. This was an isolated problem affecting 118 scripts out of 180 at two schools. AQA instructed the schools to photocopy replacement papers and allow students extra time. AQA did not find evidence that student performance was affected by the error.

AQA – GCSE History

Two students received question papers with some pages in the wrong order. The papers were replaced by their schools and the students were given extra time. The Principal Examiner for the paper reviewed and marked the students' scripts. There was no evidence that the students' performance had been affected by this issue.

OCR – AS Classical Greek

One of the words in a translation exercise did not feature in the defined vocabulary list. Initial evidence suggested that approximately half of the students could not translate the word. The words were therefore removed from the mark scheme during standardisation. OCR investigated the error and found no evidence to suggest that the inclusion of the unfamiliar verb adversely affected students' performance, either on the question itself or any other question.

OCR – GCSE History

The question, worth 10 marks out of 81 in total, took the form of a statement, followed by an instruction 'Explain your answer'. But the preceding part of the instruction "how far do you agree with the statement" was missing. Students had a choice of this question or another similar question. The mark scheme was amended to allow marking of all possible responses. OCR's analysis of the performance of the affected question and its alternative did not suggest that the error had disadvantaged students.

Pearson – A level Applied ICT practical exam

The instruction for students to print their work for activity 3 was missing. Students who completed activity 3 but did not print their work risked not being awarded marks. Pearson contacted all schools to ask them to check for student work for activity 3; where available the work was marked as usual; where there was evidence that the students had completed the task but not printed it, and it could not be retrieved, Pearson provided an estimated mark for activity 3 based on the student's performance on the rest of the paper.

Exam delivery

Awarding organisations and event notifications

We monitor the delivery of summer exams to identify risks that might stop exam boards delivering timely and accurate results. We require exam boards to notify us of any event that has occurred, or is likely to occur, that could have a negative impact on students, standards or public confidence, which we refer to as an 'Adverse Effect'¹¹.

We oversee how the exam boards deal with such incidents, which include security breaches, reports of malpractice, whistleblowing allegations and other issues. If we believe that an exam board is not handling an incident appropriately, and is, or is likely to be, in breach of its Conditions of Recognition, we can take regulatory action.

Security breaches

Each exam is designed to be taken at a particular time. Schools and colleges must keep them secure until just before the scheduled time of the exam. If the content becomes known before this time, the security of the paper can be breached. Every year a small number of security breaches occurs, either because papers sent to schools are lost or because schools open and issue a set of papers on the wrong day.

In summer 2015, 44 security breaches were reported to us. We monitor how exam boards handle them to see whether security breaches are contained. If they cannot

¹¹ Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/461218/general-conditions-of-recognition-september-2015.pdf define an Adverse Effect as follows.

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be contained we expect the exam board, independently or via the school or college, to take appropriate action. In cases where there is strong evidence of a widespread security breach we would expect an exam board to take action to reduce any risks to the fair delivery of the exam; this might include replacing the question paper or rescheduling the exam for the whole cohort. If an exam board decides not to replace the question paper, we expect it to monitor for any evidence of a wider security breach (such as social media posts), and to analyse whether there is anything in the way students performed that might indicate a wider security breach had occurred.

Two of the 44 security breaches were due to thefts of two vans that were delivering papers to schools. Where necessary, the papers that were missing were replaced, in order to reduce the risk of any unfairness to students.

Ten of the 20 security breaches in 2014 were due to schools opening the wrong papers. As a result, exam boards introduced new guidance for the 2015 exam series to reduce this risk of this occurring. They now require two people to check papers before they are handed out to students. We do not yet know how widely this new rule was implemented in schools, but we do know that a similar proportion of security breaches were recorded (28 out of the 44) in 2015 as a result of schools and colleges opening the wrong papers. Exam boards are considering what additional safeguards they can put in place for summer 2016.

Malpractice

We require exam boards to take all reasonable steps to prevent malpractice in the development, delivery and award of their qualifications. An exam board must investigate whenever it suspects malpractice has occurred and, if it has, it must take proportionate action against those responsible. The exam board must also take all reasonable steps to prevent recurrence.

Exam boards require schools or colleges to report all suspected incidents of malpractice to them and cooperate with any subsequent investigation. Each case of malpractice, whether reported by the school or college, a student or parent or identified by the exam board itself, must be considered and judged on an individual basis in the light of all the information available. Where malpractice is identified, the outcome should be commensurate with the gravity of the malpractice.

We do not require exam boards to report the details of all individual malpractice investigations to us, but for GCSE and A level we collect and publish data on the number of allegations they investigated and their outcomes¹².

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/malpractice-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2015-exam-series>

Exam boards are also required to report to us cases that have the potential to cause an adverse effect on students, standards or public confidence. The number of cases increased from seven notifications in 2014 to 15 in 2015. We have monitored how exam boards have dealt with these cases to assure ourselves that appropriate action was taken.

Whistleblowing allegations

Whistleblowing is a term used when an employee raises a concern about suspected malpractice or wrongdoing and/or the covering up of malpractice or wrongdoing of which become aware at their workplace.

Whistle-blowers usually report issues direct to their employer. However, sometimes they might feel that the management are involved in the issue or they worry that it will affect their employment. In those instances there is often an independent body, known as a 'prescribed person', they can alert to their concerns. We are the prescribed person for concerns about qualifications. Table 2 shows that the number of cases reported to us rose this year, from 18 to 28. Note that the total in the table is higher, as some cases related to more than one board.

Of those 28 separate allegations, 15 related to school and college malpractice in exams, 20 related to school and college malpractice in controlled assessments. Some of the allegations related to both exams and controlled assessment, hence the overall total is more than 28. One allegation related to examiner malpractice, but the exam board found no evidence to substantiate the allegations.

Table 2: Incidents of whistle-blowing reported to Ofqual

| Exam board | 2014 | 2015 |
|-------------------------|------|------|
| AQA | 8 | 10 |
| Cambridge International | 2 | 3 |
| IBO | 0 | 0 |
| OCR | 1 | 6 |
| Pearson | 6 | 11 |
| WJEC | 6 | 3 |

Monitoring marking progress

Exam boards use different approaches to marking. These include whole paper marking (where one marker marks all of a student's paper, either on paper or on screen) or item-level marking (where different markers mark each question, or 'item', on screen). We describe these different approaches in more detail in our research on quality of marking¹³.

Throughout the summer marking period we monitor exam boards' progress against their planned schedules. An exam board must notify us if it believes that there are any issues that might affect its ability to complete marking accurately and on time. This enables us to intervene if necessary to reduce risks to the quality and timely conclusion of marking.

We asked exam boards to provide us each week with information on the number of scripts that had to be marked, the number still to be marked and whether their performance was in line with their plans.

There were two broad areas of concern this year, although they were managed by the exam boards concerned and did not result in any delays to the issue of results.

Delays in the scanning of scripts

Exam scripts are taken to central scanning depots, which are used by more than one exam board. One board notified us of a delay in scanning that could have affected others, and could have caused a delay in scripts being made available for marking. We and the exam boards monitored the situation closely and, although there were some delays for some papers, the delays did not affect the completion of marking.

Online marking systems

There were some instances where a paper had moved to online marking and examiners who were using the systems for the first time took longer to mark than expected. This caused a small delay in the marking of scripts. We closely monitored these issues during the summer and the delays did not affect the completion of marking.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/description-of-the-gcse-and-a-level-marking-process>

Awarding and results

GCSE, AS and A level standard-setting

We closely monitor standard-setting in GCSEs, AS and A levels. We do this because we expect very close comparability of grade standards between different exam boards and between different syllabuses in any one subject. Exam boards send us data from their GCSE, AS and A level awards, detailing the outcomes (results) against statistical predictions of the proportions of students likely to achieve the key grades¹⁴.

Our aims in this monitoring are to:

- maintain standards year on year;
- align standards across exam boards in a subject;
- secure public confidence in the results being issued.

We expect exam boards' outcomes to be close to predictions, unless they can provide evidence to justify different outcomes. We set reporting tolerances to be used, based on the number of students entered for a qualification. For syllabuses with more than 3,000 students, exam boards must report and provide evidence to justify any outcomes which are more than one percentage point away from the predictions. For smaller entry syllabuses, the reporting tolerances are wider.

Further detail on the predictions used for awarding and the reporting tolerances used in summer 2015 is published in a separate regulatory document.¹⁵

During July and early August 2015, we reviewed daily the data from the 743 awards (216 A level, 225 AS and 302 GCSE awards). Of those, 51 were out of tolerance at one or more grades and in all cases we accepted the additional evidence provided by the exam boards.

Inter-board comparability

One of our aims in monitoring the awarding of GCSEs and A levels is to make sure that, within a subject, it is no more easy or difficult to get a particular grade with one exam board than with another. We have published a separate report which details our conclusions about inter-board comparability of grade standards in GCSEs and A

¹⁴ At GCSE the key grades are A*, A, C and F; at AS they are A and E, and at A level they are A*, A and E.

¹⁵

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20150710183905/https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates>

levels in summer 2015¹⁶. We conclude that with respect to grade standards, in general there is no discernible advantage or disadvantage in entering students for different exam boards.

Monitoring Cambridge International IGCSE First Language English (0522)

Entries for this qualification have increased in recent years and in summer 2015 they almost doubled to just over 200,000. As a result we have monitored this qualification closely in recent years. Cambridge International informed us early in 2015 that their routine analysis had identified some leniency in grading IGCSE First Language English in summer 2014. Cambridge International told us that, as a result, it intended to tighten its grade standards at Grade C and, to a lesser extent, at Grade A in summer 2015.

Cambridge International had particular challenges in setting standards in this qualification. This was partly due to the increased entry: about half of the increase was from schools new to the syllabus, while the other half was from existing schools entering more students. Cambridge International told us that the increase in entry was also disproportionately focused on students who might be expected to achieve C/D, potentially exacerbating a clustering of students around the C/D borderline.

We asked Cambridge International to provide us with the evidence for how they had come to its awarding decisions in 2015. In setting standards in IGCSEs, Cambridge International use very similar evidence to the GCSE exam boards. Cambridge International considered predictions based on KS2 prior attainment and comparisons of the results for 'benchmark centres' - schools with stable entries for this syllabus in 2014 and 2015. Evidence from the benchmark centres suggested that to tighten grade standards as far as Cambridge International had intended (in relation to KS2 predictions) would have been too severe.

The other factor that made awarding more challenging was the bunching of marks, particularly around the C/D boundaries. On one paper, the difference between C and A was only 4 marks. We concluded that Cambridge International had carried out its grading appropriately. Cambridge International has carried out further analysis since the summer and is confident that their grading was appropriate.

A levels in Modern Foreign Languages

In 2014 we conducted an in-depth analysis of all exam boards' A level French, German and Spanish assessments. This was in response to teacher and other stakeholder concerns about how few students achieve top grades in the subjects and the perceived difficulty of the qualifications compared to other A level subjects.

¹⁶ Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2015-summer-exam-series-report>

Our analysis¹⁷ focused on the design and function of the exam questions, papers and mark schemes. The exam boards committed to make specific improvements to the assessments for summer 2015 exams. These included designing exam questions that would be more demanding, to differentiate more effectively between more able students, and revising the mark schemes.

Our analysis suggested that if the assessments were better at discriminating between the very able students, the percentage of students achieving the A* grade might increase as a consequence.

In some syllabuses there appear to have been some small improvements, but in general the exams this summer do not appear to have been significantly more demanding than in previous years. The exam boards committed to monitor the impact of the changes to the assessments and they have now reported to us in detail. We will consider those reports and discuss further actions with exam boards ahead of the 2016 exams.

Post-summer results issues

Some issues arose after results were issued in August. Some of the processing issues reported here came to light as a result of enquiries about results, or complaints made by schools and colleges. Most of the results reported here are data processing errors rather than errors in marking. Nevertheless, they affect students' results and they affect public confidence in the results issued, and so we monitor closely the actions taken by exam boards.

The figures reported in table 3 below have been collated from notifications sent by exam boards. They are compared with figures reported at the same time in 2014.

Table 3: Grade changes reported as event notifications (at subject level)

| | 2014 | | | 2015 | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| | Total Grade Changes | Grade increases | Grade decreases | Total Grade Changes | Grade increases | Grade decreases |
| AQA | 309 | 309 | 0 | 376 | 305 | 71 |
| Cambridge International | 41 | 38 | 3 | 97 | 64 | 33 |
| IBO | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| OCR | 118 | 109 | 9 | 968 | 951 | 17 |
| Pearson | 184 | 184 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| WJEC | 162 | 156 | 6 | 163 | 163 | 0 |
| Total | 814 | 796 | 18 | 1604 | 1483 | 121 |

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/improvements-to-be-made-to-a-level-foreign-languages>

OCR reported 968 grade changes. 936 of the grade changes (919 upward and 17 downward) were for students taking higher tier GCSE Mathematics (B). In this case, there was a failure in OCR's program to derive students' final grades based on final grade boundaries. OCR told us they would implement an IT control to ensure this was corrected by Nov 15 series.

AQA reported 376 grade changes. 118 of the grade changes (all upward) were for students taking A level General Studies as a result of human error by one of AQA's third party contractors, which resulted in incorrect marks being applied to students in AQA's system. 67 of the grade changes (all downward) were for students taking GCSE Religious Studies, as a result of adjustments made following a malpractice investigation. In that case, AQA inadvertently sent an electronic results file containing the original results to the centre, who released them early on results day. AQA did not allow those original results to stand.

WJEC reported 163 grade changes. 150 of the grade changes (all upward) were for students taking GCSE English, GCSE Home Economics and L1/2 Certificate in English Language. In the former two subjects, there were human errors in applying a scaling process to students' marks; and in the latter subject, there was a human error in the processing of carry-forward marks from a previous exam series.

Cambridge International reported 97 grade changes (64 upward and 33 downward). They were for students taking a variety of Cambridge IGCSE subjects, and were related to issues such as: results being issued based on incomplete scripts; mis-indexing or incorrect labelling of students' work; and results being issued before mark adjustments or scaling had been applied.

Enquiries about results

Schools and colleges (and in some case students themselves) can ask for a mark to be reviewed once results have been issued. We have published a separate report on the number and nature of such requests made for GCSEs and A levels in 2015 and their outcome.¹⁸

Enquiries about results rose by 27 per cent in 2015, from 451,000, to 572,350. These enquiries related to 506,750 qualification results, or about 6% of all qualifications awarded in 2015.

We requested more detail than previously about the enquiries about results received by each exam board in 2015. This included the unit and subject for which each request was made, and the outcomes of each request. We have yet to analyse the

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/enquiries-about-results-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2015-exam-series>

data, but we expect it will provide us with a better understanding of the nature, and associated outcomes, of this year's enquiries. We will report on this in 2016.

We have recently published some research looking at how the current review of marking arrangements work and considering alternative approaches.¹⁹ The research highlights why the outcomes of reviews of marking should not be used as a proxy measure for quality of marking. We have also published a consultation²⁰ seeking views on proposed changes to reviews of marking and appeals.

Cambridge International enquiries about results

This year, for the first time, we collected data from Cambridge International on the number of enquiries about results it received for IGCSEs. Cambridge International operates a different review system²¹ to that provided for GCSEs, AS and A level, with the main difference being that a marking tolerance is applied at review stage, and marks that are within tolerance are not changed.

Table 4 shows that overall 39,256 grades were challenged with 2,902 changed. This represents changes to around 1.2% of all grades awarded and 7.4 per cent of all grades for which a review was undertaken.

Table 4: Cambridge International IGCSE enquiries about results

| | |
|--|---------|
| Total number of enquiries (all) | 47,998 |
| Qualification grades challenged | 39,256 |
| Qualifications grades changed | 2,902 |
| % of grades challenged that changed | 7.39% |
| Number of qualifications awarded | 249,119 |
| % of total qualifications where grade changed | 1.16% |

- i) These figures are for UK regulated qualifications (excluding Cambridge Pre-U) as per the Cambridge International website.
- ii) These figures are for England only.
- iii) This includes all EAR services with the exception of service 9 (group review – no re-marking).

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-marking-review-processes-for-exams>

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/markings-reviews-appeals-grade-boundaries-and-code-of-practice>

²¹ <http://www.cie.org.uk/images/174738-enquiry-about-results-uk-guide-june-2015.pdf>

Ofqual's reporting on summer issues

During the autumn we publish a number of official statistics bulletins. As well as those on malpractice and enquiries about results already mentioned, we also report details on the number of access arrangements and special consideration requests for GCSE and A level.

Access arrangements

Exam boards must make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability, to enable them to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding in assessments. The exam boards provide various access arrangements, for example enlarged version of papers for students with visual impairments. Schools or colleges can request one or more types of access arrangements for their students. We collect data from the exam boards and publish details of the volume and type of access arrangements used over the course of an academic year.²²

We are often asked for more information about access arrangements. For the first time this year we are publishing alongside this report additional data on the use of access arrangements in different types of schools and colleges.²³

Special consideration

Special consideration applies where a student has covered the course material but is unable, through temporary illness, injury or indisposition, to be present for part of the assessment, or is disadvantaged in some way while taking the assessment. Most special consideration requests apply to question papers but a small number apply to coursework or controlled assessment tasks.

We have published separately statistics on special consideration in GCSEs and A levels in 2015.²⁴ This year 523,500 requests were approved for special consideration, a 15 per cent increase on 2014. This represents an approval rate of 92 per cent, which is the same as summer 2014. For the third year running, the most common mark adjustment made was 3% of the maximum mark of a question paper.

²² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-arrangements-for-gcse-and-a-level-201415-academic-year>

²³ Available from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofqual-2015-summer-exam-series-report>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-consideration-in-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2015-exam-series>

Conclusion

This report covers a number of issues that exam boards are required to manage to deliver a successful summer series. We believe that exam boards should do everything possible to reduce the risk of problems arising and that they should learn lessons where they do occur. We monitor the extent to which issues arise each year, whether the preventative measures taken by exam boards are sufficient and whether the steps taken to reduce the impact of any problems are appropriate.

We closely monitor the standard setting in GCSEs and A levels and we are satisfied that the exam boards have maintained standards appropriately in summer 2015 in these and other qualifications covered by this report.

We are already discussing with exam boards the arrangements for the summer 2016 exams, including arrangements for the first awards of the reformed AS qualifications in England. We have also used information gathered during summer 2015 to inform our ongoing monitoring and compliance activity for 2016. We are also considering areas where we will need to focus our attention in subsequent years as reformed qualifications are awarded for the first time.

Annex 1 – Our letter to exam boards this summer setting out our regulatory approach



27 April 2015

Ofqual

Office of Qualifications
and Examinations Regulation
Spring Place
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Dear Responsible Officer,

I am writing to you to set out our regulatory approach to any incidents which may occur during the forthcoming examination series.

Management of Incidents

We expect that as part of your duty under **Condition A6** you will already have taken all reasonable steps to identify the risks associated with the summer series. We expect that you will have established appropriate contingency plans so that you may prevent any incidents from occurring and, where incidents cannot be prevented, mitigate any Adverse Effect which might arise.

Your contingency planning will reflect your obligation in **Condition A7**, should an incident occur, to take all reasonable steps to prevent or, where this is not possible, to mitigate and correct any Adverse Effect arising from that incident as far as possible.

Notifying us about events

As part of your duty under **Condition B3** you must promptly notify us when you have cause to believe that any event has occurred or is likely to occur which could have an Adverse Effect. You must not delay in making a notification to us. You must notify us based on the information you have and provide further information as it becomes available.

In making a notification to us, you must set out the steps you have taken or intend to take to prevent, correct or mitigate any actual or potential Adverse Effect.

Our guidance sets out our expectations for meeting **Condition B3**. This includes the information we might expect to see included in any event notification:

- the qualifications, subjects and units affected;
- the number of Centres and Learners affected, with a country (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Other) location breakdown (if possible);
- the nature and cause of the event;
- the possible or actual impact of the event on Learners, including any impact on the validity of awards;
- how you became aware of the event;
- whether Centres, Learners, media or other stakeholders are aware;
- the actions you have taken or plan to take, to identify and address causes and effects, and to mitigate any Adverse Effect;

Errors in assessment materials

In previous years you committed to notify us about all question paper errors.

In accordance with Condition B3, we expect you to continue to promptly notify us whenever you identify an error in your assessment materials which could have an Adverse Effect.

We have previously set out the way in which we will categorise and report any errors. In considering the information you might provide to us in your notifications, it would be helpful if you could also let us know how you are categorising any error.

Our approach to event notifications

We will continue to acknowledge and monitor the notifications you send us.

As set out above, it is your responsibility to manage any incidents which occur. You must determine the appropriate course of action to prevent or, where this is not possible, to mitigate any Adverse Effect whilst ensuring you remain compliant with all of your Conditions of recognition.

It is not for us to approve your approach to the management of an incident, to suggest an alternative approach or to negotiate with you about the action you should take to mitigate any incident.

If we believe your approach to the management of an incident is inadequate or inappropriate, such that we believe you are likely to breach your Conditions, then we will inform you of this.

Dependent on the details of any particular incident and the urgency with which redress is required, we may;

- give you the opportunity to review your plan in light of our concerns; and/or
- take regulatory action and Direct that you take specified steps to ensure compliance with your Conditions.

If we decide it is necessary to Direct, we will follow the procedure set out in our policy: Taking Regulatory Action.

We will keep records of every instance where we notify you that we consider your response to be inadequate or where we issue a Notice of Intention to Direct. Should there be multiple or significant instances, we will consider after the summer whether further regulatory action should be taken.

Last year we reported on the issues that you and we managed during and after the summer exam series. We will publish a similar report later this year.

Yours sincerely,

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