

# Decisions on Conditions, Requirements and guidance for setting GCSE (9 to 1) grade boundaries



We consulted between 30 November 2016 and 6 January 2017 on the Conditions, Requirements and guidance for setting GCSE (9 to 1) grade boundaries. These are the regulations that exam boards must follow when setting grade boundaries for these qualifications.

We previously consulted on the approach we expect exam boards to take to setting grade standards and our decisions are published on our website<sup>1</sup>. This consultation was on the rules to implement that approach, which are similar to those we already have in place for existing GCSE, AS and A levels and reformed AS and A levels.

We also consulted on a proposal to remove a requirement from the *GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Mathematics* and *GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Modern Foreign Languages*, which duplicated a proposed requirement in the GCSE (9 to 1) qualification level Conditions.

Some of the requirements we plan to introduce for setting grade boundaries for GCSE (9 to 1) qualifications will not be set through qualification level Conditions or guidance. Instead, we will include them in the requirements relating to grade standards that we publish each year<sup>2</sup> for all GCSE, AS and A level qualifications, in line with existing practice. These requirements will include the process exam boards must use for setting the grade 8/9 boundary and, when a new GCSE is first awarded, for referencing between current (alphabetical) and new (numerical) grades to set standards in the new qualification.

## Our proposals

We proposed the following:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/setting-the-grade-standards-of-new-gcses-in-england-2017-2018> and <http://comment.ofqual.gov.uk/setting-the-grade-standards-of-new-gcses-april-2014/>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates>

- a qualification level Condition requiring exam boards to comply with any requirements we set, and have regard to any guidance we provide, in relation to setting grade boundaries (referred to in our rules as ‘specified levels of attainment’);
- a qualification level Condition requiring exam boards to have regard to an appropriate range of evidence when setting grade boundaries, supported with guidance providing examples of such evidence. Our proposal would require exam boards to maintain a record of the evidence they use, and their rationale for selecting such evidence;
- qualification-specific requirements about the way in which grade boundaries should be set, similar to the approaches used in other qualifications (GCSE (A\* to G) and AS and A levels).

We also proposed to remove one requirement from the *GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Mathematics* and *GCSE Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Modern Foreign Languages*.

## Our decisions

There were nine responses to the consultation. Respondents generally supported our proposals, although there were specific comments made about some aspects of them. We have decided to adopt all of the proposals in the form on which we consulted, other than to correct a small typographical error in our original drafting. We explain below the decisions we have taken in relation to the specific comments made.

### Setting the 3/U grade boundary in higher tier papers

Respondents commented on the following requirement:

*In a tiered GCSE qualification, the 3/U boundary on the higher tier is provisionally set by subtracting half the mark interval between the 5/4 and 4/3 boundaries (rounding up half marks) from the 4/3 boundary. Where a review of statistical and technical evidence leads the awarding organisation to judge that the 3/U boundary should be set at a different mark, consideration must be given to moving the grade 3/U boundary, and the reasons for this must be recorded.*

Some respondents commented that they believed the flexibility to move the grade boundary on the basis of statistical and technical evidence could cause problems. They believed that there was a risk of the 3/U boundary being set too close to the 4/3 boundary, which could affect centres’ tier entry decisions. They proposed that there should be a minimum mark gap between the 4/3 and 3/U grade boundaries to mitigate this risk and help ensure consistent decisions on this grade boundary across awarding organisations.

We recognise the views of respondents about the specific wording of this part of our proposed requirements. However, this requirement does not apply in isolation. Awarding organisations must comply with a number of other requirements in this area, including our annual requirements for all GCSEs, AS and A levels (previously referred to as Data Exchange<sup>3</sup>). These require that grade boundaries are set taking account of the full range of evidence available, providing detailed requirements and guidance for awarding organisations to follow when setting grade boundaries each year. Having some flexibility allows grade standards across tiers to be aligned so that it is no easier to get a particular grade on one tier than on another.

Grade 3 in a higher tier paper is intended as a ‘safety-net’ for a student that has correctly been entered for the higher tier, but who just misses out on a grade 4. They would otherwise receive an unclassified grade. It is not intended for students that are expected to get a grade 3, who should be entered for the foundation tier. This reflects the same approach that previously existed in the *GCSE, GCE, Principal Learning and Project Code of Practice* for GCSEs in relation to the D/E grade boundary in higher tier papers.

Having considered these views, we have decided to implement the requirements we consulted on.

At the same time as putting this new requirement in place, we have decided to remove the following requirement from the GCSE Mathematics and Modern Foreign Language subject level Conditions.

*6. The 3/U grade boundary for higher tier assessments is provisionally set by subtracting half the mark interval between the 5/4 and 4/3 grade boundaries (rounding up half marks) from the 4/3 boundary.*

We have decided to remove this as it duplicates, in part, the requirement we are putting in place through the GCSE Qualification Level Conditions.

Respondents also commented that for double-award qualifications, the lowest ‘allowed’ grade permitted by our requirements is 4-3. Respondents queried whether there should also be a 3-3 grade allowed in higher tier double-award qualifications. The reason why a 4-3 grade is allowed is to give a ‘safety-net’ of a single grade for students entered for the higher tier who narrowly miss out on a 4-4 grade, who without this, would otherwise receive an unclassified grade. The higher tier is not intended for students that are likely to receive a grade 3-3. Allowing such a grade could encourage schools to enter students inappropriately for the higher tier. We therefore believe it is

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates>

appropriate that there is no grade 3-3 in higher tier double-award GCSE qualifications and have decided to implement the requirements in the form on which we consulted.

## **Prior qualifications**

We proposed to set a requirement, mirroring that which is in place for AS and A level qualifications, that:

*In respect of each GCSE Qualification which it makes available, the range of evidence to which an awarding organisation has regard for the purposes of Condition GCSE9.2 will only be appropriate if it includes evidence of...*

*(c) the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners taking that qualification in a –*

*(i) prior assessment (which was not for that qualification), whether or not that assessment was for a regulated qualification, or*

*(ii) prior qualification, whether or not that qualification was a regulated qualification...*

One respondent asked for clarification on what is meant by a prior qualification in this context.

This requirement is intended to be flexible and mirror the requirements in place for AS and A level qualifications. This will allow for the approach to be tailored to ensure that the most appropriate evidence is considered for a particular year, as that evidence may change over time. Where there are specific qualifications that should be considered to be prior qualifications for a particular year, or in a particular subject, we would specify this in our annual requirements. For example, we expect that for new GCSEs, achievement in the previous versions of the qualification will be a key piece of evidence in the first year of awards. We have decided to implement this requirement in the form on which we consulted.

## **Grade 5 boundary**

Our requirements set out the key grade boundaries. These are the boundaries that are set using statistical evidence and examiner judgement. Other grade boundaries are set arithmetically based on the key grade boundaries. For non-double-award GCSEs, the key grade boundaries are:

- 1/U
- 4/3
- 7/6
- 9/8

Some respondents commented that grade 5 could also be subject to high levels of scrutiny. These respondents queried whether grade 5 should be made a key grade boundary in future years, to ensure it is comparable across exam boards. They suggested our requirements should be sufficiently flexible to allow for this.

We have considered these responses and have decided to implement our requirements in the form on which we consulted, meaning that grade 5 will be an arithmetic/calculated grade boundary. We will keep under review the need to change this.

## **Setting grade boundaries for reformed qualifications**

We proposed requirements for setting key grade boundaries. Some respondents commented that in the first year the process for setting grade 9 will be different to that which is set out in our requirements. This is because in the first year we will set the standard for grade 9 and in subsequent years we will carry forward that standard.

The requirements we consulted on already allow for this and we will set specific requirements that relate to setting grade boundaries in the first year through our annual requirements.

Respondents also commented on the following requirement:

*5...b) in compliance with Condition H3.1, in the second and subsequent years of awarding, set each key grade boundary so as to ensure consistency with the standard set for the same grade boundary in the first year in which the qualification is awarded, and...*

Respondents commented that this requirement could exclude the possibility of adjusting the standard in subsequent years if there is evidence to suggest that this needs to be done.

The requirements we consulted on will already allow for this possibility. Our requirements state that:

*5...c) without prejudice to the requirements in paragraphs 2(a) and 2(b), have regard to achieving suitable qualification level outcomes.*

We have decided to implement these requirements as consulted on subject to correcting an error in the version we published in the consultation. The reference to *paragraphs 2(a) and 2(b)* in the extract above should refer to *paragraphs 5(a) and 5(b)*. We will correct this and implement these requirements.

## **Guidance on 'similar' subjects**

We proposed to implement the following guidance:

*In addition, in setting the specified levels of attainment for a GCSE Qualification that it makes available, we expect an awarding organisation to have regard, as appropriate, to the level of attainment demonstrated by Learners who have taken a pre-reform GCSE qualification in –*

*(a) the same subject, or*

*(b) where there was no pre-reform GCSE qualification in the same subject, a similar subject.*

Respondents commented that it may not be clear what constitutes a ‘similar’ subject in the context of this guidance.

This guidance is intended to allow for the small number of subjects for which the range of reformed GCSEs available differs from that which is, or was previously, available. Examples where other ‘similar’ subjects might need to be considered could be: English, where English, English Language and English Literature have been replaced by English Language and English Literature; or Science where Combined Science has replaced Additional Science. Where this is the case, what constitutes a similar subject will vary by subject. Where this applies, we will set out for exam boards what subjects they should consider and set out any requirements that are relevant in our annual requirements.

We have decided to put in place this guidance in the form on which we consulted.

## **Next steps**

We have updated the following documents to include these requirements:

- GCSE (9 to 1) Qualification Level Conditions and Requirements
- GCSE (9 to 1) qualification level guidance

We updated the following documents to remove paragraph 6e from the tiering requirements as this is now included within the GCSE (9 to 1) Qualification Level Conditions and Requirements.

- GCSE (9 to 1) Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Mathematics
- GCSE (9 to 1) Subject Level Conditions and Requirements for Modern Foreign Languages

These new requirements take effect from 16 February 2017.