

Enquiries about results resulting in grade changes of two grades or more

Summer 2015 examination series



May 2016 - updated June 2017

Ofqual/16/6004

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Background

In summer 2015, there was increased use of the enquiries about results services by GCSE, AS and A level students. Around 8,026,550¹ GCSE, AS and A level qualifications were awarded: 572,350 unit level enquiries were made, relating to 480,550 qualification grades². Of these, 90,950 had their grades changed. This represents just over 1.1 per cent of all grades awarded and 18.9 per cent of all grades challenged.

Some of these grade changes were due to marks that represented legitimate differences in examiners' professional opinion being changed at the enquiry stage, and some of these grade changes were due to error. The vast majority of the grade changes were by one grade. Just 639 qualifications had grade changes of two grades or more.

Ofqual collects summary data relating to enquiries about results each series from exam boards to produce the official statistics reports³. In addition, following the summer 2015 examination series, we wrote to exam boards to request detailed enquiries about results data, including additional data for students whose qualification results changed by two grades or more. Such grade changes are likely to result from a large mark change on one or more units or components within the qualification, or the cumulative effect of small mark changes on multiple units. In contrast, changes of one grade could be the result of a very small mark change on one unit, possibly by just one or two marks. Such small mark changes, that can still result in a grade change, are more likely to reflect legitimate differences in examiners' professional judgement, rather than any error.

This report provides an overview of the data relating to qualification grade changes of two grades or more for GCSEs, AS and A levels in summer 2015. The data relates to AQA, CCEA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC, and refers to enquiries at both the unit and qualification level. Where possible, the report also provides more information about the reasons behind the grade changes. Whilst exam boards systematically capture enquiries about results information, such as type of service, they are currently not always systematic in the information that they capture about why mark or grade

¹ The figures in this paragraph are rounded to the nearest 50.

² Enquiries are submitted at the unit level but each qualification is made up of multiple units, meaning that students can submit more than one enquiry for each qualification.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/enquiries-about-results-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2015-exam-series>

changes have occurred. For example, whether it is the result of a misapplication of the mark scheme, an examiner missing part or all of a response, or some sort of clerical/administrative error on the part of the board or the school/college.

Results

Service types associated with grade changes of two grades or more

In total, there were 832 unit-level enquiries relating to qualification grade changes of two grades or more for GCSEs and A levels in summer 2015, out of over 22 million GCSE and A level unit entries. The unit enquiries associated with grade changes of two grades or more covered the three enquiry types that exam boards offer as part of their post-results service: a clerical re-check (service 1), a review/priority review of marking⁴ (service 2/2P), and a re-moderation of the school or college's internal assessment (service 3).

Qualifications that experienced a grade change of two grades or more were most frequently associated with reviews of marking (service 2 or service 2 priority requests), followed by re-moderations (service 3), and clerical checks (service 1; see Table 1). This pattern remained consistent when only units where a raw mark change had occurred were considered (ie units that actually contributed to the grade change; see Table 1⁵). There were, however, differences by qualification type (see Table 2). At AS and A level, enquiries were much more frequently associated with reviews of marking (service 2 or service 2 priority requests) than re-moderations (service 3), whilst at GCSE (Full Course), the split was much more even between service 2 and service 3 requests.

There were very few qualification grade changes of two grades or more associated with a service 1 enquiry. Where the reasons for these changes were provided by exam boards (three out of seven cases), these were all related to administrative errors: for example, un-scannable scripts were not flagged (two cases), or the original examiner mis-keyed the marks (one case). This is not unexpected given the nature of the service 1 enquiry, which is to check for clerical errors.

⁴ Priority reviews of marking are when a university place depends on the outcomes and are only available for AS/A2 units.

⁵ The raw mark change was not available for one unit enquiry.

Enquiries about results – two grade changes

Table 1: *Number of enquiries by service type involved in qualification grade changes of two grades or more*

Service	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries	Unit enquiries with raw mark change	% of unit enquiries with raw mark change
Service 1	7	1	7	1
Service 2	525	63	476	62
Service 2 priority	76	9	67	9
Service 3	224	27	220	29
Total	832	100	770	100

Table 2: *Number of enquiries by service type involved in qualification grade changes of two grades or more by qualification level*

	A level double		A level		AS level		GCSE full course		GCSE short course	
	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries	Unit enquiries	% of unit enquiries
Service 1	0	0	1	1	2	1	4	1	0	0
Service 2	0	0	52	39	276	84	187	53	10	100
Service 2 priority	4	100	55	42	17	5	-	-	-	-
Service 3	0	0	27	20	35	11	162	46	0	0
Total	4	100	135	100	330	100	353	100	10	100

Level of qualifications with grade changes of two grades or more

The 832 unit enquiries associated with a grade change of two grades or more related to 639 unique qualifications⁶. This represents less than 0.01% of the 8,026,550 qualifications awarded in summer 2015. AS levels were the qualification most commonly associated with grade changes of two grades or more, closely followed by GCSE full course (see Table 3). The number of grade changes of two grades or more were smaller for A level, GCSE short course and A level double awards. Indeed, there were less than 100 A level qualifications with a grade change of two grades or more. There is a later discussion in this report (see pages 17 and 18) about grades changing from B to A* at A level.

To some extent, the differences in the number of grade changes by qualification type are likely to reflect the entries for each qualification type, since the entries at AS level and GCSE full course are greater than A level, which are in turn greater than A level double awards and GCSE short courses. It is also likely, however, to reflect the structure and availability of the assessments in each qualification type. GCSEs are sat in a linear manner, in England since 2014, meaning that all units or components are sat in the series that students certificate in. Likewise, students sit the entire AS level qualification in the series that they certificate in. As such, every unit or component can be challenged when students certificate. In contrast, at A level, the majority of students will have sat 50% of the qualification (the AS units) the previous summer, meaning that only 50% of the qualification could be subject to review. This limits the impact of any mark changes, unless students are also sitting or re-sitting the AS units when they certificate at A2, though this will be a minority.

⁶ Each qualification is made up of several units or components, so that multiple enquiries can contribute to a grade change at the qualification level.

Table 3: Number of qualifications changed by two grades or more at qualification level

Qualification	Number of qualifications challenged
A level double	2
A level	92
AS level	269
GCSE full course	267 ⁷
GCSE short course	9
Total	639

Number of unit enquiries associated with grade changes of two grades or more

The 832 unit level enquiries associated with a qualification grade of two grades or more were spread across 639 qualifications. Table 4 shows the number of unit enquiries per qualification associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more, by qualification type. Note that where there are multiple unit enquiries per qualification, it is not necessarily the case that all of the enquiries contributed to the grade change. Rather, it could be that one unit had a large mark change and the other(s) had a small mark change or did not change at all. Furthermore, some qualifications comprise a greater number of units or components than others. This effectively increases the number of unit results that can be challenged.

As shown in Table 4, the majority of grade changes of two grades or more were the result of an enquiry to just one unit or component in the qualification, regardless of qualification type. This suggests that, for whatever reason, a relatively large mark change occurred on that unit. There is a later discussion of grade changes from B to A* at A level.

⁷ This includes three cases where the qualification grade changed from a U to an E on higher tier. Whilst this represents a two grade change when the whole grade range is considered, a grade E is the lowest available on the higher tier and so in reality this is only a change of one grade.

Table 4: Number of enquiries for qualification grade changes of two grades or more by qualification level

Number of unit enquiries	A level double	A level	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE short course	Total
1	1	59	209	181	8	458
2	0	27	59	86	1	173
3	1	4	1	0	0	6
4	0	1	0	0	0	1
6	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total	2	92	269	267	9	639

Where there were grade changes of two grades or more at qualification level, a grade change could have resulted from a small mark change on multiple units, or a larger change on one unit. Table 5 disentangles this further and shows how many units in each qualification contributed to the grade change. This shows that where there were multiple enquiries per qualification, the grade change typically resulted from changes on multiple units. For example, where there were enquiries on two units for a qualification, in 80% of cases the grade change was due to a combination of raw⁸ mark changes on both units, although in some cases only one of the raw marks changed. This suggests that the grade change is more likely to result from the cumulative effect of smaller mark changes on multiple units, rather than a larger change on one unit.

⁸ The raw mark refers to the mark on the script awarded by the examiner. For modular specifications (or those qualifications that were formerly modular), raw marks are converted to uniform marks (UMS) so that marks can be combined across examination series. A student's subject grade is awarded based on the total number of UMS marks that they achieve.

Table 5: Number of units contributing to a qualification grade change of two grades or more

Total number of unit enquiries	Number of units with raw mark change				Total
	1	2	3	4	
2	34	139	-	-	173
3	3	2	1	-	6
4	0	0	0	1	1
6	0	0	0	1	1

Subjects with grade changes of two grades or more

Overall, the subjects most commonly associated with grade changes of two grades or more were English (including English/English language/English literature), art and design (all endorsements), history, religious studies and sociology. This differed by qualification type (see Table 6). At GCSE (full course), English and art and design experienced the greatest number of qualification grade changes of two grades or more, whilst at AS level it was English and history, and at A level it was art and design, psychology and sociology.

To some extent, these patterns are likely to represent the nature of the subjects. The subjects that have experienced the most grade changes of two grades or more tended to be those subjects that are marked less objectively, due to the format of the assessment. Many of the subjects contain long essay questions that are central to the validity of the assessment, yet are more challenging to mark.

Table 6: Number of qualifications with grade changes of two grades or more by subject and qualification level

Subject	A level	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE short course	Total
English	10	100	89	-	199
Art and design	9	16	43	-	68
History	4	40	6	-	50
Religious studies	4	21	16	9	50
Sociology	10	34	-	-	44

Magnitude of grade changes

The majority of grade changes of two grades or more were increases of two grades, regardless of the qualification level (Table 7). Indeed, grade changes of more than two grades were extremely rare, representing 69 cases out of a total of 8 million qualifications that were awarded in summer 2015. There were only two instances of the qualification grade changing by 5 grades, both at GCSE (full course), one due to a review of marking and the other due to a re-moderation, each of one unit. The reason for the change was provided for the latter case: the large change was due to a re-moderation that was compounded by a clerical error when inputting the original moderated mark (the mark was input as 11 instead of 115). The exam board was not able to provide the reason for the change due to the review of marking.

Large grade changes of two grades or more were typically in an upwards direction: there were a far greater number of grades increasing by two grades or more (99%) than there were decreasing by two grades or more. There were, however, six cases where the grade decreased and these were all by two grades. In the context of large grade changes the patterns observed are perhaps not unexpected, since enquiries are unlikely to be made for students who have achieved a much higher grade than anticipated, whether this was through clerical errors or a perceived issue with the marking/moderation.

Table 7: Magnitude of grade changes

Grade change	Applied double	A level	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE short course	Total
Decrease two grades	0	0	5	0	1	6
Increase two grades	2	89	247	218	8	564
Increase three grades	0	3	15	39	0	57
Increase four grades	0	0	2	8	0	10
Increase five grades	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	2	92	269	267	9	639

Note. The increase of two grades includes two applied double A level awards that increased from AB to *A.

Qualification mark changes associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more

In addition to the magnitude of the grade changes, we also looked at the change in raw and uniform mark scale (UMS)⁹ marks at qualification level that resulted in a qualification grade change of two grades or more. Whilst this provides some insight into the scale of any mark changes, there are a number of limitations to be considered. For example, when considering changes in raw marks, it is difficult to make comparisons across qualifications, since one raw mark will not equate to the same number of UMS marks for every qualification. This depends on the positioning of the grade boundaries. As such, each qualification will require a different change in raw marks to bring about a grade change of two grades or more. In addition, the unit raw mark changes do not include any issues that are rectified at the qualification

⁹ Raw marks are converted to UMS marks for modular qualifications so that marks can be combined across examination series. A student's subject grade is awarded based on the total number of UMS marks that they achieve.

level, for example the addition of marks due to special consideration, meaning that there are cases (17 in the present analyses) where the students' raw marks do not change, but the total UMS mark and the qualification grade does. Focusing upon the change in qualification level UMS marks overcomes these issues to some extent, but the issue that different numbers of marks are required to bring about a grade change of two grades or more remains, since this will depend on the total UMS marks for the qualification. For the present analyses, the UMS data are also incomplete (20 cases are missing data, some due to the qualification being linear).

Bearing these issues in mind, Figure 1¹⁰ shows a summary of the raw mark changes at qualification level that resulted in a qualification grade change of two grades or more. Where there are multiple units contributing to a grade change, the raw marks are summed. As shown, there is a large range in the number of raw mark changes, from -20 to +100 raw marks. On average, an absolute raw mark change of 18.53 was associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more.

¹⁰ These analyses include 17 cases where the raw mark did not change but the qualification grade did. Where reasons were provided for these changes it was apparent that they were due to clerical errors that were rectified at the qualification level (UMS marks) but not the unit (raw mark) level.

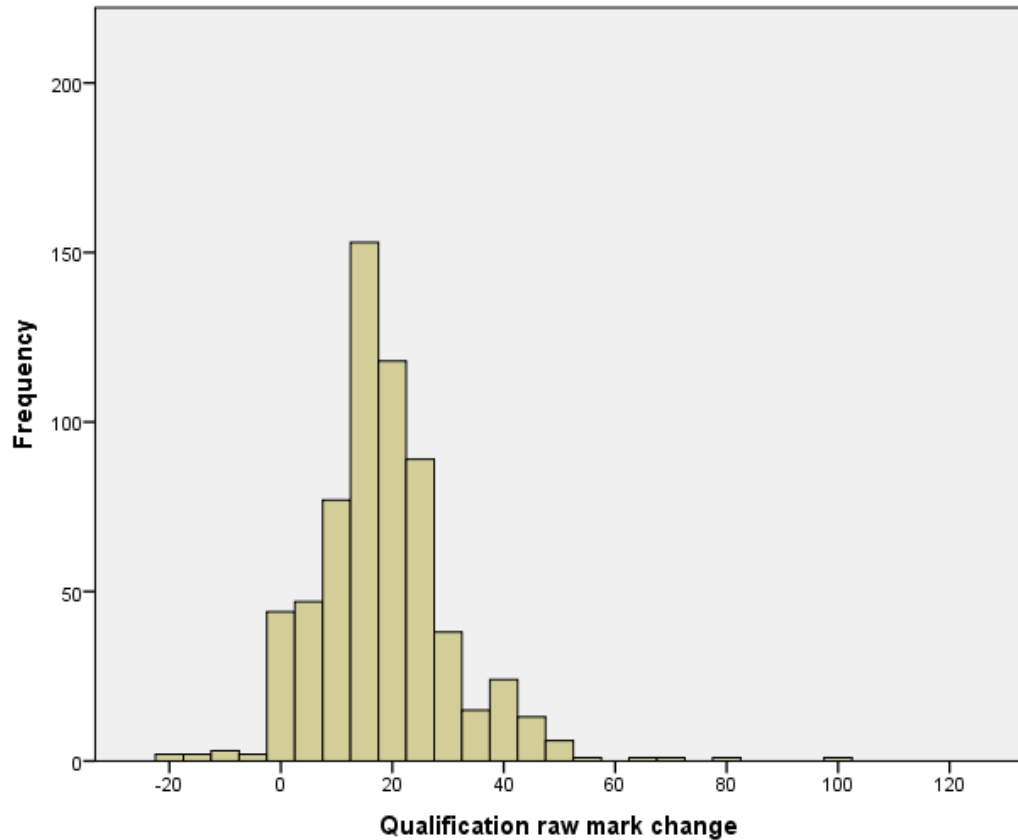


Figure 1. *Qualification raw mark changes for grades changes of two grades or more*

Figure 2 shows a summary of the UMS mark changes at qualification level that resulted in a grade change of two grades or more, with changes ranging from -41 to +153 UMS marks. These differences are greater than the raw mark changes illustrated in Figure 1 but this is not unexpected since the total UMS marks per unit are typically higher than the total raw marks per unit to avoid scaling down when converting from raw to UMS marks. For the UMS marks, the average absolute mark change associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more was 37.45 marks.

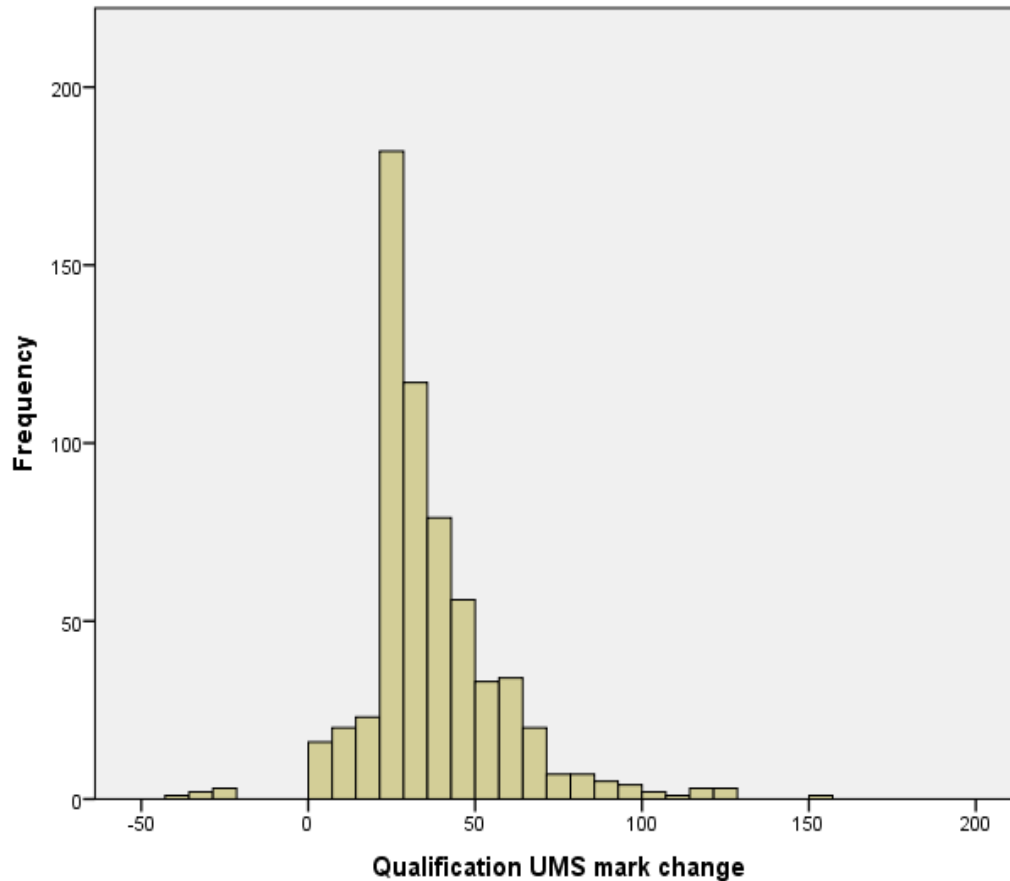


Figure 2. Qualification UMS mark changes for grade changes of two grades or more

Unit mark changes associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more

The analyses described in the previous section consider the raw and UMS mark changes at the qualification level. Where multiple unit enquiries are made for a single qualification, such changes could be due to the cumulative effect of smaller mark changes on multiple units. Indeed, as shown in table 5, where two units contributed to a grade change, both units had a change of mark in the majority of cases.

Figure 3 shows the raw mark change at unit level for units associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more. Whilst there are some large changes that are likely to represent unacceptable error, there are also many small mark changes. Indeed, for 148 of the 831 units¹¹ associated with a qualification grade change of two grades or more (18%), the mark change is less than or equal to three

¹¹ Data were missing for one unit enquiry.

raw marks. Where these changes are due to a review of marking, such a small change is likely to represent a legitimate difference in examiners' professional opinion, rather than an error in the application of the mark scheme.

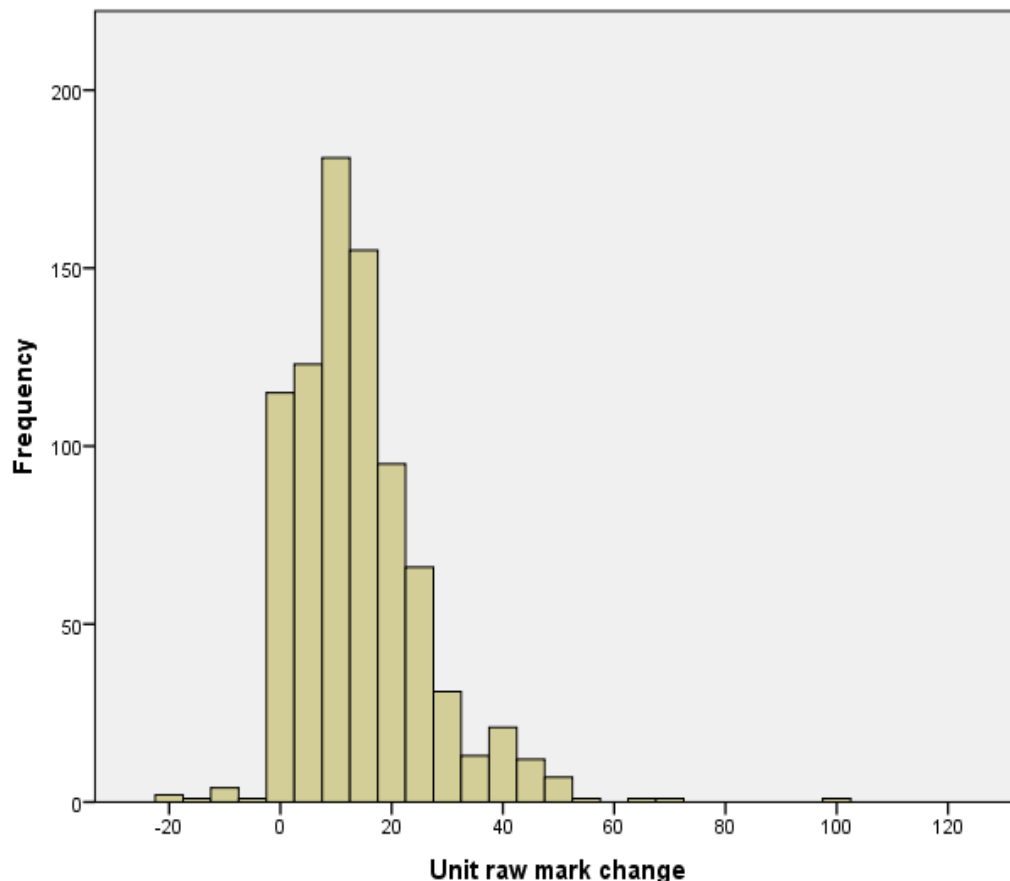


Figure 3. Unit raw mark changes for grade changes of two grades or more

Original qualification grade

Tables 8-10 show the original qualification grade for grade changes of two grades or more for A level, AS level and GCSE (full course), respectively. It is apparent that the patterns are quite different at each qualification level. For A level, the majority of grade changes of two grades or more were associated with an original qualification grade B (74%; see later discussion), whilst at AS, qualification grade changes of two grades or more were most frequently associated with an original qualification grade D (40%). At GCSE, grade changes of two grades or more were more evenly distributed across the grade range but were most frequently associated with an original qualification grade B (30%).

Table 8. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of two grades or more – A level

Original qualification grade	Decrease two grades	Increase two grades	Increase three grades	Increase four grades	Increase five grades	Total
B	0	68	-	-	-	68
C	0	11	2	-	-	13
D	0	7	0	0	-	7
E	0	2	1	0	0	3
F	0	0	0	0	0	0
G	-	0	0	0	0	0
U	-	1	0	0	0	1
Total	0	89	3	0	0	92

Note. These figures exclude two applied double A level awards that increased from AB to *A.

Table 9. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of two grades or more AS level

Original qualification grade	Decrease two grades	Increase two grades	Increase three grades	Increase four grades	Increase five grades	Total
B	0	1	-	-	-	1
C	1	70	0	-	-	71
D	4	96	8	0	-	108
E	0	56	3	1	0	60
F	0	0	0	1	0	1
G	-	0	0	0	0	0
U	-	24	4	0	0	28
Total	5	247	15	2	0	269

Table 10. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of two grades or more GCSE (full course)

Original qualification grade	Decrease two grades	Increase two grades	Increase three grades	Increase four grades	Increase five grades	Total
B	0	79	-	-	-	79
C	0	44	5	-	-	49
D	0	43	10	3	-	56
E	0	32	9	2	0	43
F	0	11	7	2	1	21
G	-	8	4	1	0	13
U	-	1	4	0	1	6
Total	0	218	39	8	2	267

As shown in Table 8, at A level, the majority of the grade changes of two grades or more are from a B to an A*. In many ways, A* at A level is a special case since the A* rules¹² mean that it is possible for a relatively small mark change to move a grade B directly to an A*. This is illustrated in Figure 4 (reproduced from Sutch and Wilson, 2013), that shows the relationship between A level grade and contributing UMS marks from AS and A2. Students marked in burgundy on the graph have received a grade B, yet some of these students (particularly in art, history and English literature) are in an area of the graph bordering the segment with the A* students (the upper left, just below the UMS 90% line). These students need just a few more A2 UMS marks to push them over the boundary into the A* category, meaning that a two grade change could result from a very small mark change.

Examination of the 2015 enquiries about results data illustrates this point. There is an example of one candidate receiving an increase of just one raw mark (two UMS marks) at qualification level that resulted in their qualification grade changing from a B to an A*. Additionally, the average absolute UMS mark change at qualification level

¹² To achieve an A* students must a) achieve a grade A overall (equivalent to 320 UMS on a four unit A level) and b) have at least an average of 90% of available UMS for A2 examinations (equivalent to 180 UMS or more for a four unit A level).

for students moving from a B to an A* was 22.95 UMS marks (min = 2, max = 117), compared to an average UMS change of 37.45 marks for all students with a grade change of two grades or more (see Figure 2). Clearly, some of the changes from a B to an A* (particularly the case cited above) are not examples of a large mark change or unacceptable error in the system. Rather, it is likely due to a legitimate difference in examiner's professional judgement and the position of the candidate relative to the grade boundaries and the A* criteria.

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Figure 4. *Relationship between A level grade and UMS score (reproduced from Sutch and Wilson, 2013)*

Explanations provided by exam boards for large grade changes

In addition to the data described above, exam boards were asked to provide an explanation for the large grade changes that were observed. However, as mentioned earlier, exam boards, in general, do not appear to routinely collect or store information on large grade changes. This means that this information is not readily available and was only provided for some of the enquiries. In particular, providing an explanation for service 3 requests (re-moderation) is considered more difficult.

Where an explanation for the grade change was provided, this took two formats: some cases were categorised according to a list of explanations provided by Ofqual, whilst others were accompanied by a detailed written explanation for the change from the exam boards. In total, 195 unit enquiries (out of a total of 832 enquiries) fell into the first category, and 611 into the second category (note there was some overlap between the two and an explanation was provided in addition to the categorisation). It is worth considering that these explanations were provided at the unit (ie enquiry) level and not the qualification level. Thus, where multiple units contributed to a grade change, the reasons might not be the same for every unit in that qualification, and only one unit might have actually contributed to the grade change. Furthermore, multiple explanations are possible for a change on an individual unit, for example, a large grade change could result from a review of marking that also uncovered a clerical/administrative error.

Of the 195 enquiries that were categorised according to the explanations provided by Ofqual, over half (53%) cited an issue in applying a levels based mark scheme¹³ as the reason for the change (see Table 11). This is perhaps not surprising given that the subjects typically associated with a grade change of two grades or more are likely to contain extended response items that use levels of response mark schemes.

The next most common reasons were an issue with the original moderator and the misapplication of a points based mark scheme.

¹³ Levels based mark schemes are used for longer response questions (eg essays) and require examiners to award marks holistically rather than for specific points.

Table 11: *Reasons for mark changes by enquiry (categorised responses)*

Reason	Number of enquiries	% of enquiries
Work not seen/not marked	12	6
Admin/clerical error by marker on computer system	5	3
Admin/clerical error in adding up item marks	3	2
Misapplication of mark scheme – points based	22	11
Misapplication of mark scheme – levels based	104	53
Unusual candidate response	2	1
Correct answer but not in mark schemes (points based only)	1	1
Issue with original examiner	11	6
Issue with original moderator	22	11
Other	13	7
Total	195	100

Of the 611 cases where a written explanation was provided, 91 had also been classified according to the categories in Table 11 so were excluded from the remaining analyses. The explanations provided for the remaining cases were then classified into five broad categories¹⁴: clerical/administrative error, review of marking, re-moderation, review of marking/re-moderation and clerical/administrative error, or the application of special consideration. It was not possible to determine the reason for the grade change in four cases so these were classified as ‘other’.

Table 12 summarises the number of enquiries that fell into each of these categories. The majority of explanations were associated with reviews of marking, followed by re-

¹⁴ Using the finer grained categories shown in Table 11 was not possible since insufficient detail was provided.

moderations, and then clerical/administrative errors. Where a clerical or administrative error occurred (and these were rare when considered in the context of the number of assessments processed each examination series), the reasons for the changes varied considerably and included the following: missing scripts were found at a later date and marked; estimated marks were generated at a late stage; there were errors with scanning/inputting centre marks; there were errors by exam boards /examiner inputting marks; students were mistakenly marked as absent; students were entered for one tier but sat the other tier; there were errors in processing OTQ questions; and un-scannable scripts were not flagged. Where cases were due to a review of marking or re-moderation, no details were given about the exact cause of the changes: for example, whether they were due to the misapplication of a levels of response mark scheme or a points based mark scheme. Thus, further classification of the explanations was not possible.

Table 12: *Reasons for mark changes by enquiry (explanation provided)*

Reason	Number of enquiries	% of enquiries
Clerical/admin error	61	12
Review of marking	317	61
Re-moderation	126	24
Review/Re-mod and clerical/admin error	12	2
Application of special consideration	2	0
Other	4	1
Total	522	100

Summary

This report suggests that grade changes of two grades or more at qualification level are relatively rare when considered in the context of the number of enquiries about results and the number of qualifications awarded each series. Furthermore, it shows that some grade changes of two grades or more are due to small mark changes that are likely to represent legitimate differences in examiners' professional opinion, rather than unacceptable error in the system, in particular, when grades change from a B to an A* at A level. However, for the remaining cases the grade change of two grades or more are typically the result of a large mark change that is likely to represent unacceptable error in the system.

The report suggests that large grade changes are more prevalent in certain subjects and qualification types than others. This is likely to reflect the structure and nature of the assessments, since some assessments are inherently more subjective than others. Indeed, the subjects with the greatest number of large grade changes tended to be those with a higher level of subjectivity: English, art & design, history, religious studies and sociology.

When considering the reasons for large mark changes, limited data was available since exam boards do not routinely capture this information. However, where this information was provided, it was evident that the reasons were varied. They ranged from clerical and administrative errors to misapplication of the mark schemes and issues with the moderation. Typically, grade changes of two grades or more were associated with reviews of marking rather than a re-moderation or a clerical/administrative error. Furthermore, where finer grained reasons were provided, the most prominent reason for a mark change was the misapplication of a levels of response mark scheme. These mark schemes are likely to support extended response items that are necessary to assess skills in certain subjects, for example, in English. The findings reported here therefore highlight the need to ensure that levels of response mark schemes are appropriately developed, and their use supported, through the standardisation and marker monitoring process.

The finer grained reasons for the mark changes for the enquiries associated with a mark change of two grades or more were only provided in a minority of cases. Currently, exam boards do not seem, in general, to routinely capture the reasons for a large mark or grade change. This makes it difficult to determine the most likely reason for a qualification grade change of two grades or more.

References

Sutch, T. and Wilson, F. (2013). *Reaching for the A*: Exploring the extent and effect of resitting at A-level*. Research Matters: A Cambridge Assessment Publication, 16, 40-48.

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