Summer 2019 GCSE, AS, A level and level 3 project qualifications

A summary of our monitoring

Summer 2019 GCSE, AS, A level and level 3 project qualifications

This document summarises our monitoring of the awarding of GCSE, AS, A level and level 3 project qualifications in summer 2019 and provides a summary of out of tolerance awards.

1. Maintaining standards

Our aim in monitoring the awarding of GCSE, AS, A level and level 3 project qualifications is to ensure a level playing field for students, so that it is no easier or harder to achieve a grade in a subject with one exam board than another. To do this, we agree with exam boards the basis for statistical predictions using prior attainment for the cohort: AS, A level and level 3 project predictions are based on GCSE prior attainment, and GCSE predictions are based on key stage 2 prior attainment. We then monitor how close the exam boards' results are to those predictions.

For reformed qualifications being awarded in the first or second year (GCSE, AS and A level qualifications first awarded in 2018 or 2019), we agreed that exam boards should meet the predictions as closely as possible. It is possible for exam boards to set boundaries that lead to an award away from prediction, but they have to provide supporting evidence to do so.

For legacy and non-reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications, as in previous years, we set reporting tolerances around the predictions. This summer, we also set tolerances around the predictions for reformed qualifications that are being awarded in the third or fourth year (GCSE and A level qualifications first awarded in 2017 and AS qualifications first awarded in 2016 or 2017). We also included level 3 project qualifications (ie the extended project qualification) in our monitoring for the first time and set tolerances around the predictions. For all of these qualifications, exam boards are required to provide additional evidence to support any awards that are out of tolerance. Section 5 of this report provides further details of qualifications where the award is out of tolerance or not as close as possible to prediction.

We pay close attention to the way in which different exam boards' grade standards in a subject are aligned. Ahead of results being issued, we meet with the exam boards to review the emerging results. This enables us to judge whether standards have been maintained at overall subject level. Where we believe that exam boards' grade standards are not aligned within a subject, we have the power to require them to bring their award into line with other boards.

2.   Setting standards in reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications

In England, 25 new GCSEs and 19 new A levels (not including maths) were awarded for the first time this summer. Most subjects are now reformed (there are a small number of new GCSE and A level language qualifications that will be awarded for the first time in summer 2020).[1] For the reformed qualifications, we agreed with exam boards that they should carry forward standards from the legacy qualifications by using statistical predictions. Our intention is that, in general, a student who would have achieved a particular grade on the previous qualification would achieve the same or equivalent grade on the reformed qualification.

Statistical predictions are the most effective way to carry forward grade standards to new qualifications, so that students in the first cohort of a new qualification are not unfairly disadvantaged. In the first and second years of awarding the reformed qualifications, senior examiners are asked to check whether the quality of student work at the grade boundaries suggested by the statistical predictions is acceptable (at grades A or E for AS and A level, and at grades 7, 4 and 1 for GCSE). To ensure that exam boards are following these requirements in the same way, we worked with them to develop a set of principles, with which they all agreed. From the third year onwards, senior examiners will continue to have a role in judging the quality of student's work, but reporting tolerances are applied to the outcomes compared to the statistical predictions.

3.   Setting standards in GCSE combined science, modern foreign languages (French, German and Spanish) and separate sciences

Last summer were the first awards in GCSE combined science, modern foreign languages (French, German and Spanish) and separate sciences (biology, chemistry and physics). These qualifications are tiered, with the higher tier targeted at grades 9 to 4 (9-9 to 4-4 in combined science) and the foundation tier targeted at grades 5 to 1 (5-5 to 1-1 in combined science).There is also an allowed ('safety net') grade on the higher tier (grade 3 or 4-3) that is provisionally set as a half grade-width below the grade 4 or 4-4 boundary.

Last summer we allowed exam boards to additionally award an exceptional grade 3-3 on the higher tier of GCSE combined science, along with a full-width allowed grade 4-3. We also said exam boards could award a full-width grade 3 in separate sciences and modern foreign languages.[2]

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[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-the-facts-gcse-and-a-level-reform/get-the-facts-as-and-a-level-reform
[2] https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2018/08/20/gcse-results-day-what-to-expect/

Ahead of this summer, we wrote to all schools and colleges to emphasise that those arrangements were exceptional and that they would not be repeated in summer 2019.[3] Exam boards also contacted those schools and colleges that were affected in 2018 to support them in making tier entries ahead of this summer. We wanted schools and colleges to reflect on their entry decisions in 2018 and think carefully about which tier to enter students for in summer 2019.

We also reviewed the provisional entry data with exam boards and published this in May. This showed that in all subjects there had been a shift in entries towards the foundation tier. Then, during awarding in July and August, we reviewed data showing the percentage of higher tier students that would be ungraded with a half-width grade 3 or 4-3. For each specification, the percentage of students was significantly lower than in summer 2018 before our intervention, suggesting that most schools and colleges had responded to the advice provided by exam boards and us, and adjusted their tier entries.

Exam boards set the grade 3 and 4-3 boundaries as half grade-width boundaries this summer for combined science, modern foreign languages and the separate sciences. Alongside the exam boards, we will continue to consider how we can support schools in making appropriate tier entry choices ahead of summer 2020.

4.   Monitoring the quality of delivery

Exam boards must notify us of any events that could have an impact on the effective delivery of valid and reliable assessments, such as question paper errors, concerns about serious malpractice and breaches to the security of exam materials. We will report on the summer 2019 notifications in our report on the summer series that we will publish in December 2019.

5. Summary of 2019 awarding outcomes

Exam boards report data to us from each of their awards.[4] For legacy and unreformed qualifications, and reformed qualifications being awarded in the third or fourth year, the outcome of each award is evaluated compared to a given reporting tolerance. Where the actual and predicted outcomes for a specification differ beyond this reporting tolerance (that depends on entry size), the exam board must inform us and provide additional information to support an out of tolerance award.

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[3] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-letter-gcse-combined-science-and-modern-foreign-languages-mfl

[4] More detail on the reporting procedures and tolerances can be found in our 2019 data exchange procedures document.

The reporting tolerances are as follows.

Matched entry[5]	Reporting tolerance
500 or less	Not applicable
501 – 1,000	±3%
1,001 – 3,000	±2%
3,001 or more	±1%

These reporting tolerances apply to the following grades. Note that because the majority of GCSE, AS and A levels awarded this summer are reformed qualifications, there is only 1 unreformed GCSE and 1 legacy A level qualification that has a reporting tolerance. There are no legacy AS qualifications with reporting tolerances because of low entries.

- unreformed GCSE – grades A and C

- reformed GCSE being awarded in the third year – grades 7 and 4

- reformed AS being awarded in the third or fourth year – grade A

- unreformed/legacy A level – grade A

- reformed A level being awarded in the third year – grade A

- extended project qualification – grade A*

For A*, the allowable tolerance between predicted and actual outcomes for unreformed and legacy GCSE and A level qualifications is ± 2%.[6]

For reformed A levels being awarded in the third year, reporting tolerances are not applied at grade A* and exam boards are expected to meet the prediction as closely as possible, unless there is compelling evidence not to. For small entry specifications, the approach to setting grade A* is outlined in the data exchange procedure. This is the same approach as for reformed A levels being awarded in the first and second year, so we have included grade A* in our monitoring summary for all reformed A levels.

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[5] Matched entry refers to the number of students who can be matched to their prior attainment (GCSE or key stage 2).
[6] For qualifications where there are more than 500 matched entries and more than 100 of the matched entries obtained grade A overall.

For reformed GCSEs being awarded in the third year, reporting tolerances are not applied at grade 9 and exam boards are expected to meet the prediction as closely as possible, unless there is compelling evidence not to. For small entry specifications, the approach to setting grade 9 is outlined in the data exchange procedure. The approach to setting grade 9 is different in the first year of awards because the 'tailored' formula is used.[7] We will include grade 9 in this monitoring summary once all GCSEs are reformed and the same approach is taken for all subjects.

For reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications being awarded in the first or second year, we agreed that exam boards should meet the prediction[8] as closely as possible. Where the matched entry was greater than 500 and outcomes were not as close as possible to the prediction, the exam board had to inform us and provide additional information to support the award.

This applies to the following grades:

- GCSE – grades 9, 7 and 4

- AS – grades A and E

- A level – grades A*, A and E

This summary includes only AQA, OCR, Pearson and Eduqas awards.[9] Prior to 2016, we have also reported out of tolerance awards from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). However, we do not regulate reformed GCSE, AS or A levels awarded in Northern Ireland and CCEA no longer offers its qualifications to students in England.

For comparison, a summary of out of tolerance awards for 2018 is reported in the Appendix.

[7] https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2017/04/05/setting-grade-9-in-new-gcses/
[8] Note that for grade 9 the 'prediction' in the first year refers to the figure calculated using the 'tailored' formula.
[9] As we do not regulate reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in Wales, these qualifications are not part of our monitoring.

Awards out of tolerance or not as close as possible to prediction

Figure 1 shows the number of awards reviewed against a prediction in 2018 and 2019, and the number outside of reporting tolerances or not as close as possible to prediction. In total, data for 540 awards were reviewed in 2019 (141 GCSE awards, 190 AS awards, 205 A level awards and 4 project awards), and of these, 275 were reviewed against a prediction.

Figure 1. Summary of awards reviewed against prediction in 2018 and 2019

	A level		AS		GCSE		Project
Awards reviewed against a prediction	111	117	43	74	118	156	3
Awards out of tolerance or not as close as possible to prediction	10	6	1	6	6	11	2
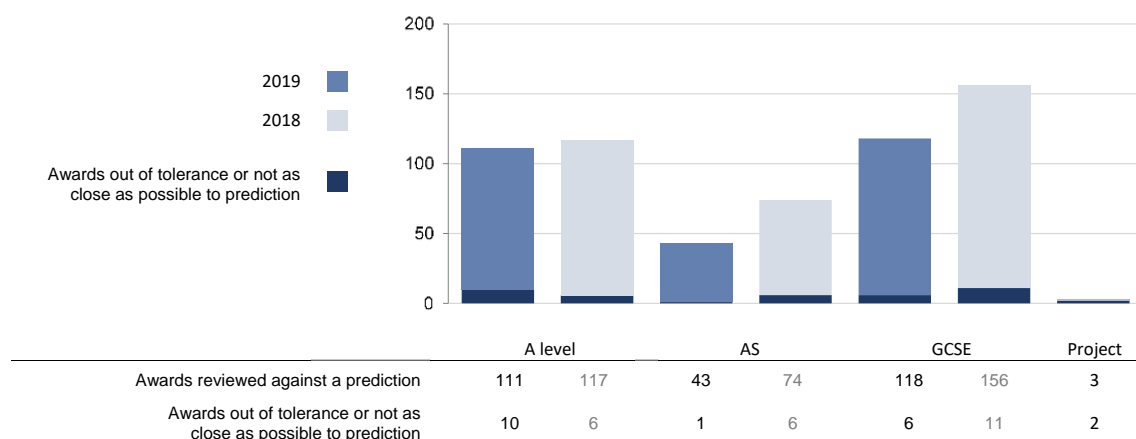
The remainder of this report breaks down the awards that were out of tolerance or not as close as possible to prediction by qualification type and whether the qualification is legacy/unreformed or reformed. Our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award is also provided, according to the reasons outlined as part of the summer 2019 data exchange procedures.[10]

In summary, the classifications are as follows:

- technical – a technical reason for being out of tolerance, such as where it is not possible to meet predictions because of the impact of common boundaries across endorsements or options

- aligning standards – where exam boards have evidence to support an adjustment to standards

- cohort – where the cohort for a qualification is different from previous years in a way that might make predictions less reliable

- other – any other relevant factor

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[10] See: 2019 data exchange procedures.

There are no out of tolerance awards for unreformed/legacy A levels, reformed AS qualifications being awarded in the third or fourth year, or unreformed GCSEs.

A level

Table 1 shows the reformed A level awards being awarded in the third year that are out of tolerance at grades A* and A and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 1. A level (reformed specifications being awarded in the third year) out of tolerance awards

	Reporting tolerance	Grade		Rationale
		A*	A	
Art and Design	1%	-	Above	Other
Biology	2%	-	Above	Cohort

Table 2 shows the reformed A level awards that are being awarded in the first or second year that are not as close as possible to prediction at grades A*, A and E and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 2. A level (reformed specifications being awarded in the first or second year) awards not as close as possible to prediction

	Grade			Rationale
	A*	A	E	
D&T (Product Design)	-	Above	-	Cohort
Drama and Theatre	-		Above	Cohort
Film Studies	-		Below	Cohort
Film Studies	-		Below	Cohort
Latin	-		Below	Cohort
Media	-		Below	Cohort
Music	-		Below	Cohort
Spanish	-		Below	Cohort

AS

Table 3 shows the AS subjects that are being awarded in the third or fourth year that are out of tolerance at grade A and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 3. AS (reformed phase 1 and 2) out of tolerance awards 2019

	Reporting Tolerance	Grade	Rationale
		A	
Art and Design	3%	Above	Cohort

GCSE

Table 4 shows the GCSE awards that are being awarded in the third year that are out of tolerance and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 4. GCSE (reformed specifications being awarded in the third year) out of tolerance awards

	Reporting Tolerance	Grade		Rationale
		7	4	
Mathematics	3%	Below	Below	Cohort

Table 5 shows the GCSE awards that are being awarded in the first or second year that are not as close as possible to prediction and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 5. GCSE (reformed specifications being awarded in the first or second year) awards not as close as possible to prediction

	Grade		Rationale
	7	4	
Arabic	-	Above	Cohort
Art and Design	-	Below	Cohort
Combined Science	Below	Below	Cohort
Engineering	Above	Above	Aligning Standards
Urdu	-	Above	Cohort

Project qualifications

Table 6 shows the level 3 project qualification awards that were reported as out of tolerance and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 6. Project out of tolerance awards

	Reporting tolerance	Grade	Rationale
		A*	
Project	2%	Below	Other
Project	2%	Above	Other

Appendix – Awarding outcomes in summer 2018

Table 7. A level (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards 2018

	Reporting tolerance	Grade		Rationale
		A*	A	
Health and social care	2%	-	Above	Technical

Table 8. A level (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction 2018

	Grade			Rationale
	A*	A	E	
Biology	Above	Above	Above	Cohort
Computer science	-	-	Below	Cohort
Latin	-	-	Below	Cohort
Music	-	Below	Above	Cohort
Music	-		Below	Cohort

Table 9. AS (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards 2018

	Reporting tolerance	Grade	Rationale
		A	
Further mathematics	2%	Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%	Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%	Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%	Below	Technical

Table 10. AS (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction 2018

| | Grade | | Rationale |
	A	E	
Physical education	-	Above	Technical
Religious studies	Below	Below	Cohort

Table 11. GCSE (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards 2018

| | Reporting tolerance | Grade | | | Rationale |
		A*	A	C	
Applied business	3%	-	-	Above	Technical
Arabic	3% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	-	Cohort
Chinese	3% (2% at A*)	Below	-	-	Technical
Design and technology: electronic products	2%	-	-	Above	Cohort
Design and technology: product design	2%	-	Above	Above	Cohort
Design and technology: textiles technology	3%	-	Above	-	Cohort
ICT	1% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	Above	Cohort
Turkish	3%	Above	-	-	Technical

Table 12. GCSE (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction 2018

| | Grade | | Rationale |
	7	4	
Combined science	Below	Below	Cohort
Mathematics	Below	Below	Cohort
Religious studies (short course)	-	Above	Cohort

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