ofqual

Delivery of
vocational & technical
qualifications in
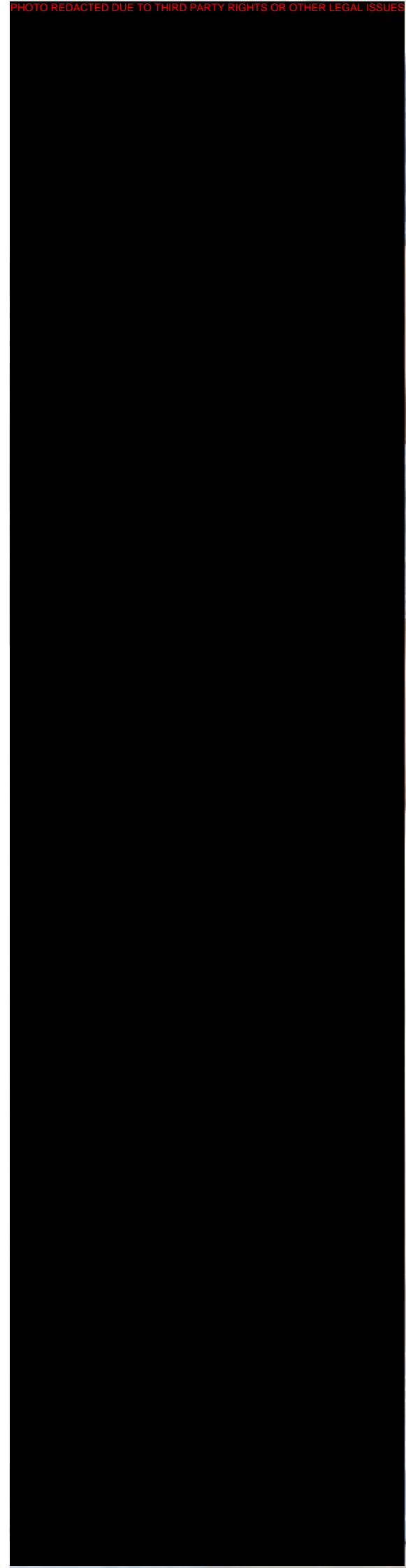performance tables

2019

Contents

Introduction

This is the first time that Ofqual has reported in this format on the delivery of vocational and technical qualifications that appear in the Department for Education's (DfE) performance tables. This report focuses on Level 1, 2 and 3 qualifications which appear in the 2018 and 2019 tables, which includes Technical Awards, Applied Generals, Technical Certificates, and Technical Levels. The safe delivery and award of these qualifications is a priority for Ofqual because they are frequently taught to young people in schools and colleges and have particular importance for their progression. They are also important because they are used to measure school and college performance.

Since 2018, we have been more closely monitoring awarding organisations' preparation for, and delivery of these qualifications. Awarding organisations have had to meet the Department for Education's full requirements for external assessment (ranging from 25-40%) in these qualifications since 2018. This created the potential for larger volumes of exam scripts and assessments in the system and with that a potential for an increase in the risks to safe delivery and award.

In delivering its assessments, each awarding organisation is responsible for the effective management of any issues that arise, and we intervene only where we feel it is necessary to protect standards, public confidence, or to mitigate any impact on learners. We analyse the issues which occurred and evaluate the cause, impact and how effectively they were managed by each awarding organisation. We decide if any regulatory response is necessary. We follow up specific events with individual awarding organisations, consider the focus of our ongoing monitoring and, where necessary, conduct additional thematic or organisation specific work to understand how to minimise the likelihood of particular types of issues from recurring.

This report compares the issues that were reported to us over the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19. Most assessments in these qualifications take place in the spring and summer of each year and this is where we focus our monitoring. However, assessments in these qualifications are offered all year round, often on-demand, so we analyse and evaluate issues that are reported to us on an ongoing basis.

This report first sets out some context to the market for performance table qualifications. It then records our approach to monitoring the delivery of assessments before comparing trends and themes in issues reported to us over the last two academic years. Case studies are provided to exemplify the range and types of issues that occurred and how we dealt with them.

Context

Entries

Twenty awarding organisations had qualifications that counted in the 2019 performance tables, compared with 21 in the 2018 tables. Pearson had the largest market share by qualification entry for Technical Awards and Applied Generals for both the academic years 2017/18 and 2018/19. NCFE and AAT had the largest share for Technical Certificates and Technical Levels respectively in both periods. Seven awarding organisations (Pearson, LIBF, OCR, AAT, NCFE, WJEC and City and Guilds) had over 90% of the entries between them in 2017/18, and 95% in 2018/19. Six awarding organisations (AQA, City and Guilds, Pearson, OCR, NCFE and WJEC) are members of the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) and as such follow the JCQ Instructions for Conducting Examinations. Other awarding organisations have their own individual procedures. This can make the delivery of qualifications more complex for centres[1], in that they may have to work to different requirements depending on the awarding organisations with which they work.

The largest change in entry by performance table category between 2017/18 and 2018/19 was for Applied Generals, which increased by 14% (to 140,620). This was followed by Technical Awards (+13%) and Technical Levels (+11%). Technical Certificates was the only category to have seen a decrease (-8%).

Entry data show that 96% (624,965) of the market for these qualifications in 2018/19 was in England, slightly higher than in 2017/18 (95%, 564,450). While these qualifications are offered in other parts of the UK and internationally, Department for Education performance table measures only apply in England.

Centres

A total of 15,971 centres delivered performance table qualifications in 2018/19, compared with 15,203 centres in 2017/18. Most of the centres were located in England (93% in 2017/18 and 94% in 2018/19).

[1] A Centre is defined in our General Conditions of Recognition as, 'An organisation undertaking the delivery of an assessment (and potentially other activities) to Learners on behalf of an awarding organisation. Centres are typically educational institutions, training providers, or employers.'

Assessments

Qualifications in performance tables are made up of a combination of external and internal assessment. External assessments are set and marked by awarding organisations, while internal assessments are marked or assessed by centres and externally moderated by awarding organisations. There were 2,297 unique external assessments used across 514 performance table qualifications in 2018/19, including modified assessments, compared with 2,148 external assessments across 547 qualifications in 2017/18. Most of the external assessments were written tests offered on paper or on screen (which may take a variety of forms, including multiple choice questions, short or extended answers or essays).

More than 80% of external assessments were offered on a sessional basis, meaning they had a specific date or window during which they were taken. The rest were on-demand assessments (409 (19%) assessments in 2017/18 and 355 (16%) assessments in 2018/19). On-demand assessments offer more flexibility and can be taken whenever learners are ready.

There were also some on-demand external assessments for which awarding organisations cannot specify the exact number of unique assessments used. This can be the case when computer-based tests are used and assessments are generated from a question or item bank for each individual learner. The number of unique assessments depends on the number of learners and when they take them.

Table 1
Number of entries for 2017/18 by awarding organisation and performance table category

	Applied General	Technical Award	Technical Certificate	Technical Level
1st4Sport Qualifications	50	280	70	n/a
AAT	n/a	n/a	22,245	21,815
Active IQ	n/a	n/a	125	30
AQA	5,830	n/a	n/a	1,430
CILEx	n/a	n/a	n/a	45
CISI	85	n/a	n/a	n/a
City & Guilds	n/a	2,085	9,630	8,720
NOCN (CSkills Awards)	n/a	215	0	0
EAL	n/a	565	230	80
IMI	n/a	690	720	65
LIBF	9,325	28,950	n/a	n/a
NCFE	120	4,725	37,670	12,975
OCR	13,015	46,305	0	5,355
Pearson	88,200	188,620	20,285	6,765
RSL Awards Ltd	n/a	2,700	0	1,665
SEG Awards	n/a	205	0	n/a
TLM	80	23,045	0	n/a
UAL	135	n/a	n/a	n/a
VTCT	310	4,345	2,240	1,820
WJEC	6,645	11,465	n/a	n/a
Total	**123,795**	**314,190**	**93,215**	**60,765**

Table 2

Number of entries for 2018/19 by awarding organisation and performance table category

	Applied General	Technical Award	Technical Certificate	Technical Level
1st4Sport Qualifications	60	445	85	n/a
AAT	n/a	n/a	22,510	22,985
Active IQ	n/a	n/a	155	130
AQA	5,935	0	n/a	1,820
CILEx	n/a	n/a	n/a	50
CISI	50	n/a	n/a	n/a
City & Guilds	n/a	2,150	8,600	9,705
NOCN (CSkills Awards)	n/a	180	0	0
EAL	n/a	755	220	10
IMI	n/a	860	420	30
LIBF	9,715	16,090	n/a	n/a
NCFE	150	14,755	46,940	15,130
OCR	16,675	78,065	1,140	6,725
Pearson	94,775	208,760	3,780	7,870
RSL Awards Ltd	n/a	3,875	10	1,425
SEG Awards	n/a	200	n/a	n/a
TLM	85	5,905	0	n/a
UAL	105	n/a	n/a	n/a
VTCT	135	4,365	1,800	1,375
WJEC	12,935	19,465	n/a	n/a
Total	**140,620**	**355,870**	**85,665**	**67,255**

All entry figures included in the tables and the report are rounded to the nearest 5.
Figures less than 5 (if not exactly zero) are denoted as 0~
Where an awarding organisation does not offer a qualification, it is recorded as 'n/a'
In some instances, where individual rounded values have been presented in a table along with their sum total, the total may be slightly different to the sum of these individual rounded values because it has been calculated using the original unrounded values.

Delivery of assessments in 2018 and 2019

In early 2018, and again in early 2019, we met with a number of the awarding organisations to assess their readiness to deliver performance table qualifications during the spring and summer assessment sessions. In 2018, our sample of awarding organisations was determined by provisional entry data for external assessment and whether an awarding organisation might be new to external assessment. In 2019, we re-visited some of the organisations to follow up from delivery in 2018, as well as meeting with some we had not visited in 2018. We looked at both general and specific areas of risk to the safe delivery and awarding of qualifications for each of these awarding organisations. In 2019, we also looked, in particular, at any steps taken by the awarding organisations to address issues that had occurred in 2018. Following our reviews, we presented our observations to each awarding organisation for their consideration.

In both years, we wrote to individual awarding organisations to set out how we expected them to manage any issues that arose during delivery and outlined the types of issues about which we expect to be notified. Copies of our letters to awarding organisations are included in the appendices to this report. We also carried out monitoring of media and social media for early warning on potential issues.

We expect awarding organisations to manage issues quickly and effectively to maintain standards and minimise adverse impacts on learners. If awarding organisations notify us of any issues, we oversee their management of these, intervening only where we feel it is necessary to protect standards, maintain public confidence, or to mitigate any impact on learners.

As part of our monitoring, we also observed a number of key processes in delivery and awarding to check that these were being carried out effectively and achieving their purposes. This included standardisation of examiners, where examiners are trained to mark or assess learner work using mark schemes or assessment criteria, and awarding meetings, where grade boundaries for assessments are set. We also collected data on entries to external assessments and results (grade boundaries and proportions of learners achieving each grade) in both years to better understand achievement rates.

After the spring and summer assessment sessions are finished, we analyse any issues that occurred, evaluate the root causes, the impact and how effectively the awarding organisations managed issues. We decide what, if any, regulatory action is required and how information gathered should feed into our ongoing monitoring of awarding organisations.

In addition to our communications with awarding organisations, we published research and guidance on Applied Generals and blog posts to highlight our work ahead of each main summer delivery period. Ahead of summer 2018, we published guidance for awarding organisations to provide a 'safety net' to learners who might have narrowly missed a pass on one or more externally assessed units. Ahead of summer 2019, we published a blog about Applied General and Technical Level qualifications drawing attention to the difference between the new and old versions of the qualifications. We also published our second piece of research on the way some of the external units functioned in these qualifications.
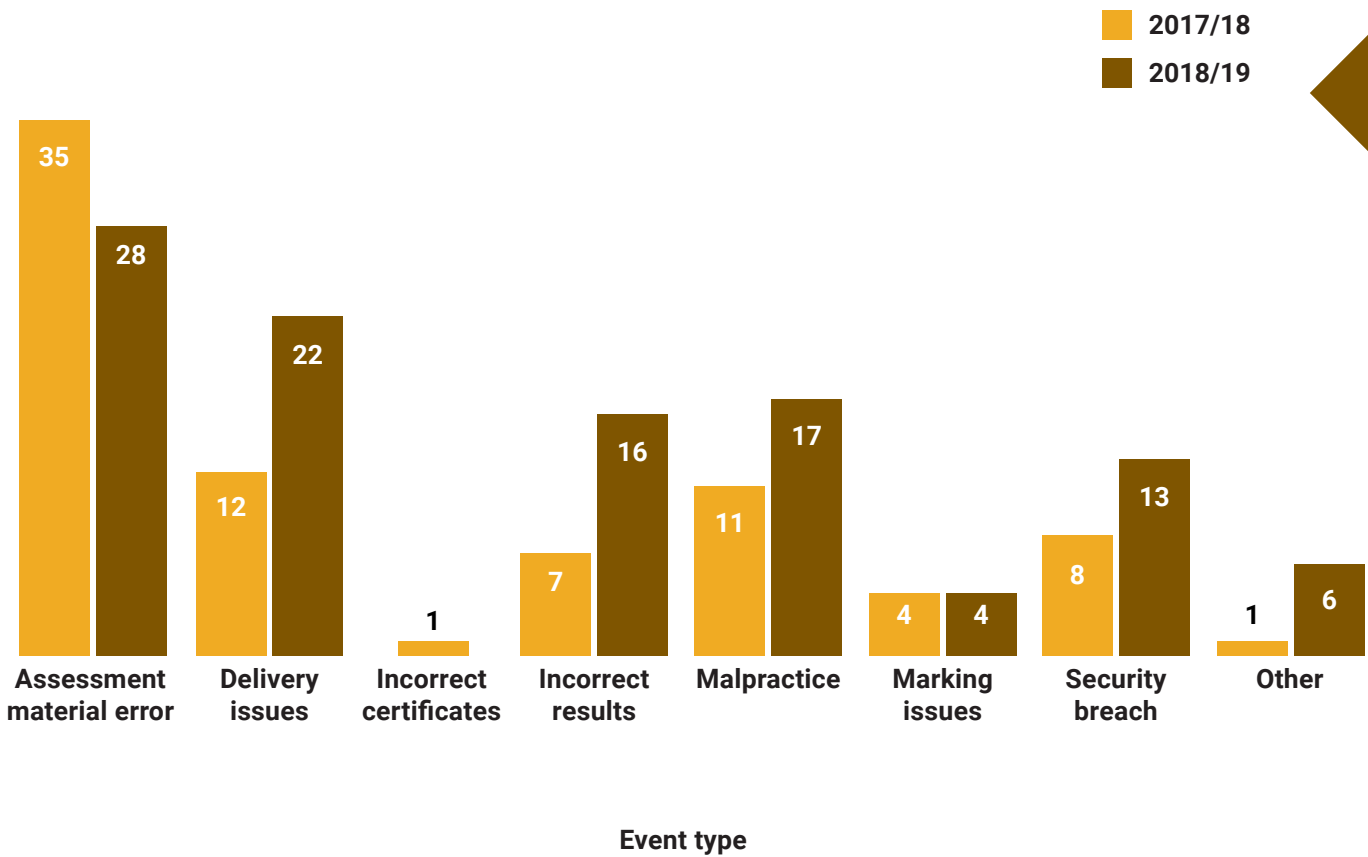
Event notifications

We expect awarding organisations to notify us about certain types of issue that occur during the delivery of assessments. We refer to these as event notifications. This is our main tool for monitoring how awarding organisations are delivering qualifications. We have a number of different categories for event notifications. The main types are: assessment material error, security breach, malpractice, delivery issues, incorrect results, incorrect certificates and marking issues. Overall, for performance table qualifications there were 106 event notifications to Ofqual in 2018/19, up from 79 in 2017/18.

The most common type of event was assessment material error. The overall increase in numbers of events reported to us may be attributed in part to both to an increase in the number of external assessments being used and a greater understanding by the awarding organisations of our expectations around reporting as a result of our closer engagement with them. The following sections in this report look more closely at the most common types of event that have been reported.

Chart 1
All event notifications

Legend:
- 2017/18
- 2018/19

Event type	2017/18	2018/19
Assessment material error	35	28
Delivery issues	12	22
Incorrect certificates		1
Incorrect results	7	16
Malpractice	11	17
Marking issues	4	4
Security breach	8	13
Other	1	6

Event type

Assessment material errors

Assessments for these performance table qualifications can take different forms. There are question papers and task briefs, some of which are paper-based while others are taken on a computer. As noted in the context section, some assessments will have a scheduled date or window, while others are taken on-demand. Whatever form the assessments take, we require awarding organisations to produce assessment materials which are clear, appropriate and fit for purpose.

Errors in assessment materials are rare, but where they occur in question papers, they can affect learners' ability to answer questions or respond to tasks as intended. Errors in mark schemes or in marking/grading criteria can lead to learners being awarded incorrect marks/grades.

Over the course of the academic year 2018/19, a total of 28 errors were reported to Ofqual as event notifications, fewer than in 2017/18 (35). Most of these were identified after the assessments had taken place and occurred within question papers.

Awarding organisations used a range of measures to mitigate the effects of these errors. In some cases, erratum[2] notices were issued to notify centres of corrections to assessments before they were taken. In other instances, mark schemes were adjusted to take into account different possible responses, or affected questions were discounted and the total marks available reduced accordingly. We monitored the awarding organisations closely, queried their approach where we had concerns and ensured that they took reasonable steps to mitigate any impact in each case.

We categorise errors by their potential level of impact before any mitigation has been applied.

Category 3

assessment material errors which will not affect a learner's
ability to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

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Category 2

assessment material errors which could or do cause unintentional
difficulties for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

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Category 1

assessment material errors which could or do make it impossible
for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

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[2] An erratum notice is a document issued to schools and colleges to tell them about, and how to correct, an error in a question paper or an exam instruction. The erratum notice is either provided for information only (if no correction is necessary) or with an instruction to be read out to students at the start of the exam.

Chart 2
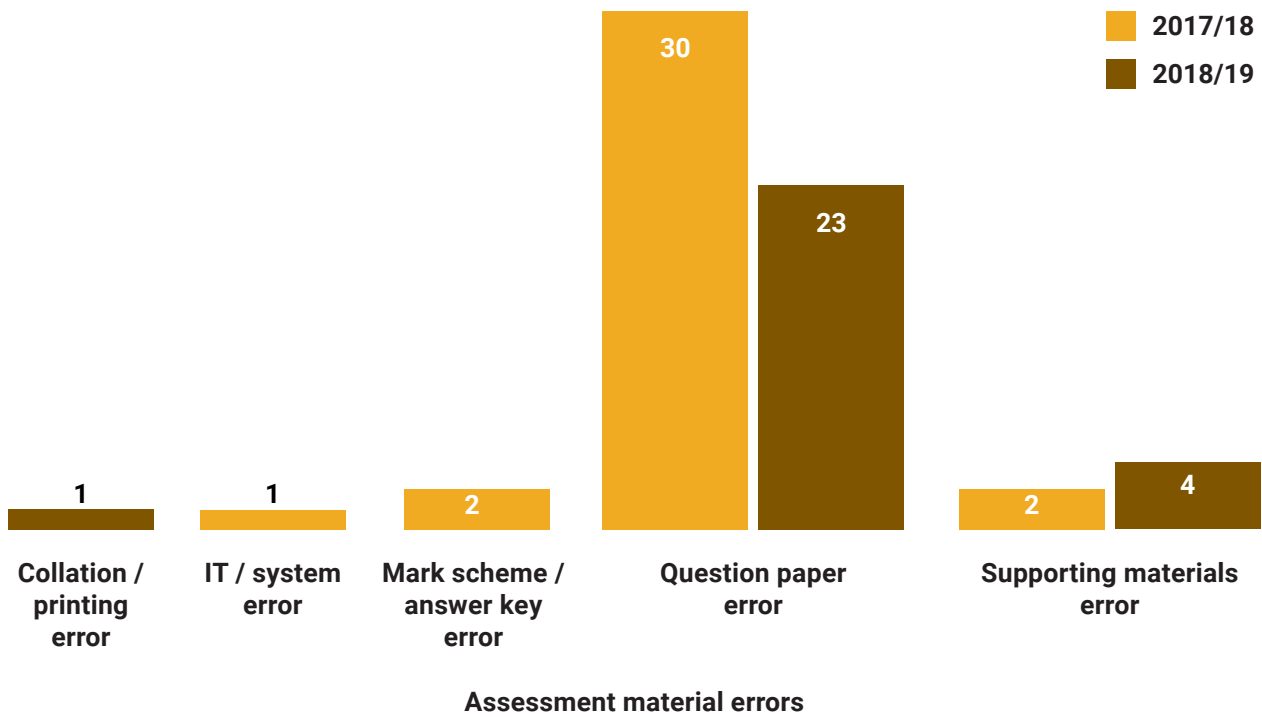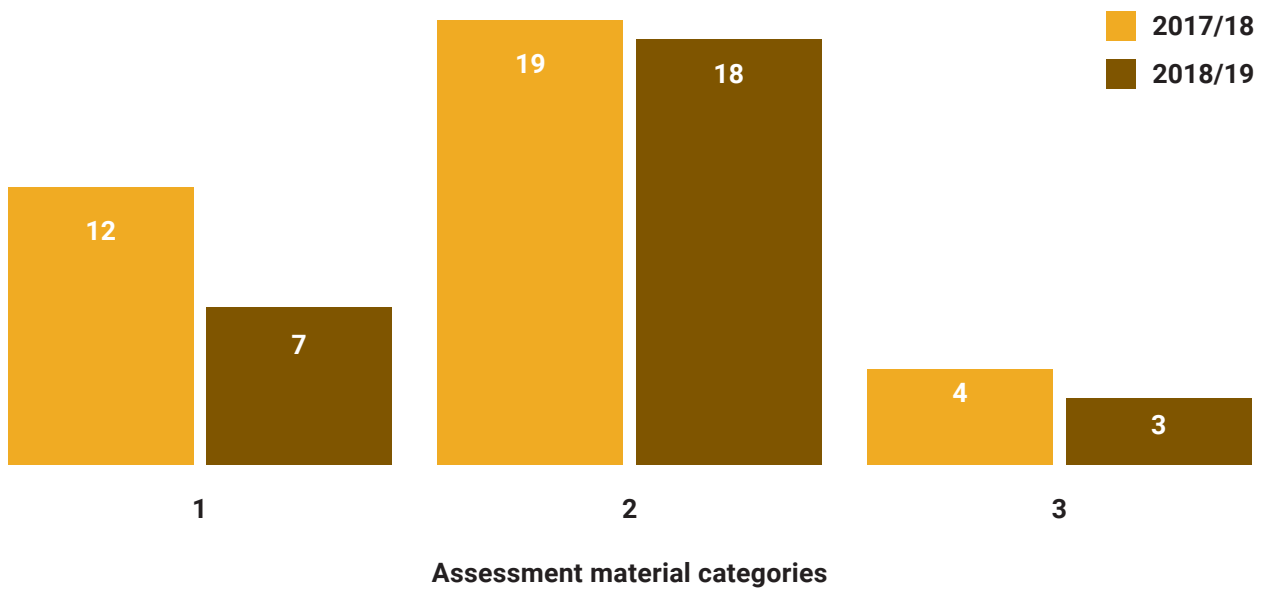## Assessment material errors by types

Legend: 2017/18, 2018/19

Assessment material errors	2017/18	2018/19
Collation / printing error		1
IT / system error	1	
Mark scheme / answer key error	2	
Question paper error	30	23
Supporting materials error	2	4

Assessment material errors

Chart 3
Number of assessment material errors by category

Legend: 2017/18, 2018/19

Assessment material categories	2017/18	2018/19
1	12	7
2	19	18
3	4	3

Assessment material categories

Case study 1

In January 2019, an awarding organisation notified us of an issue in a formulae booklet for an exam, which had been reported by centres on the day of the exam. The font used in part of a formula could have confused learners as to which of two possible values was represented and therefore what to apply in using the formula.

The awarding organisation clarified that using either value would produce an outcome, whether it was the intended correct answer or an unintended answer as a consequence of using the incorrect value. Therefore, they amended the mark scheme to allow for answers showing use of either version of the formula.

The awarding organisation found no evidence of any learners being unfairly disadvantaged during the marking process.

Case study 2

In April 2019, an awarding organisation discovered an error on an exam paper, which came to light during a meeting to standardise examiners' marking. A symbol was incorrectly displayed which could have led learners to give an unintended answer.

The standardisation of examiners meeting considered the range of responses that learners could provide to the question and the mark scheme was updated to allow for these answers.

Having checked a range of learner work and assessment functioning statistics, the awarding organisation confirmed that it was confident that no learners were unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged as a result of the symbol error.

Case study 3

In June 2019, an awarding organisation was notified by one of its centres that an incorrect document had been uploaded to its e-assessment platform at the start of its assessment window. This document related to the previous June 2018 session and not the June 2019 session.

The awarding organisation was immediately able to replace the incorrect document with the correct version and so all learners completed the assessment using the correct materials.

Security breaches

We require all awarding organisations to have appropriate measures in place to maintain the confidentiality of assessment materials. If a breach is suspected, we require awarding organisations to investigate and take all reasonable steps to mitigate its impact. We expect awarding organisations to report to us when there has been a loss or theft of, or breach in confidentiality in, any assessment materials. We also monitor media and social media to identify potential breaches and we know that most awarding organisations do too.
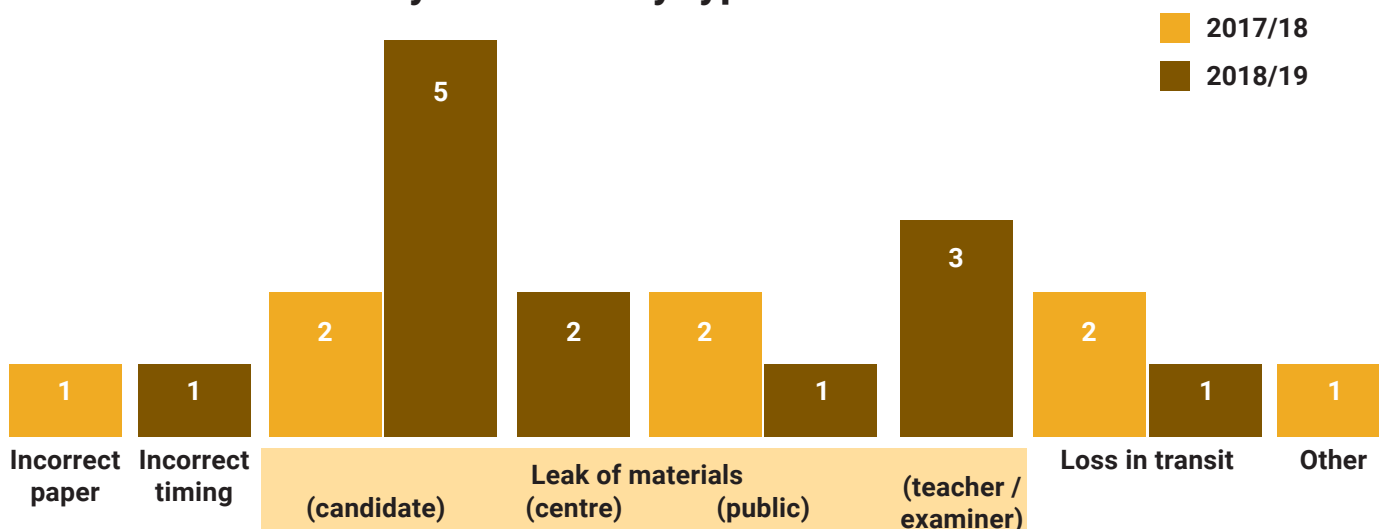
There were 13 security breaches reported to us in 2018/19 compared with 8 in 2017/18. Overall, a leak of materials, either by learners or centre staff, has been the most common type of security breach across the 2 periods (15 cases). In 10 of these 15 cases, the leaks involved the sharing or discussion of confidential assessment material over social media forums. Three such instances are described in case study 4 on page 16. In 5 of the other 7 cases, awarding organisations found no evidence, following reviews of learner performance, of widespread malpractice as a result of the leaks, which included the sharing or discussion of material on The Student Room website, Snapchat and YouTube. In the other 2 cases, awarding organisations identified evidence of malpractice which, to date, remain under investigation.

Among the other types of security breach reported over the 2 periods, there were 3 instances where exam scripts (an exam paper with a learner's written answers) went missing in transit. Two of these cases were attributable to third parties (courier and scanning bureau) and one due to an incorrect address for an examiner held by an awarding organisation. In 2 of these cases, learners had to sit a contingency paper. In the other case, learners were offered a resit or an assessed grade (a grade calculated by the awarding organisation on the basis of the learner's other assessment evidence for the qualification) and chose the latter.

There was also one case where an exam was sat at the wrong time (before the scheduled assessment time as the centre believed it to be an on-demand assessment). The awarding organisation sent a different exam paper to the only other centre due to take the paper-based assessment. There was also one case where a centre handed out the wrong exam paper to a learner. This learner sat a paper that was scheduled for a later date. They were required to sign a confidentiality statement pertaining to the contents of this paper and the awarding organisation also checked responses from other learners at the centre for this paper to check if any particular advantage had been gained. The affected learner was provided with an aegrotat grade for the paper they should have taken (equivalent to an assessed grade).

Chart 4
Number of security breaches by type

Legend: 2017/18, 2018/19

Values by category:
- Incorrect paper: 1 (2017/18)
- Incorrect timing: 1 (2018/19)
- Leak of materials (candidate): 2 (2017/18), 5 (2018/19)
- Leak of materials (centre): 2 (2018/19)
- Leak of materials (public): 2 (2017/18), 1 (2018/19)
- Leak of materials (teacher / examiner): 3 (2018/19)
- Loss in transit: 2 (2017/18), 1 (2018/19)
- Other: 1 (2017/18)

Case study 4

In January 2019, an awarding organisation reported a leak of confidential assessment material in 3 units from qualifications. The assessments were designed to be taken by learners during a two-day window at a time to be determined by each individual centre. It became apparent that content from these assessments had been shared and/or discussed on social media forums towards or at the end of the first day of each assessment window.

The awarding organisation carried out a review of learner work during the marking process in each case to establish whether there was any evidence of identical or similar answers. They also completed a range of statistical analyses to determine whether learners' results may have indicated any particular advantage had been gained.

The awarding organisation concluded that there had not been any evidence of widespread malpractice as a result of these leaks and so results for the assessments were issued as planned. The learners who had been responsible for the leaks were issued with a warning.

The awarding organisation looked at ways to prevent the recurrence of this type of breach and made changes to the assessment arrangements for its summer 2019 exam session so that assessment would take place during a single morning slot.

Case study 5

In summer 2019, an awarding organisation reported an instance at a centre where learners had been found in possession of live assessment material given to them as revision material by a tutor.

The awarding organisation suspended registrations and certifications for the centre as well as preventing them from scheduling further assessments while the investigation was carried out. They also withdrew the affected assessment material from use and began the process of developing new material to replace it.

The awarding organisation established that 16 learners at the centre had been in possession of the live assessment material, but none of these learners had taken the assessment. An extended investigation revealed that 6 learners at another centre had been in possession of the material and had taken the assessment. Results for these 6 learners were voided and arrangements made for them to re-sit the assessment. The awarding organisation imposed a temporary debarment on the tutor responsible for leaking the material, from involvement in the delivery of its qualifications.

Malpractice

Everyone involved in the delivery of an assessment has a role to play in preventing and reporting malpractice, whether they are teachers, learners or assessors. We take allegations of malpractice very seriously and we expect awarding organisations to do the same.
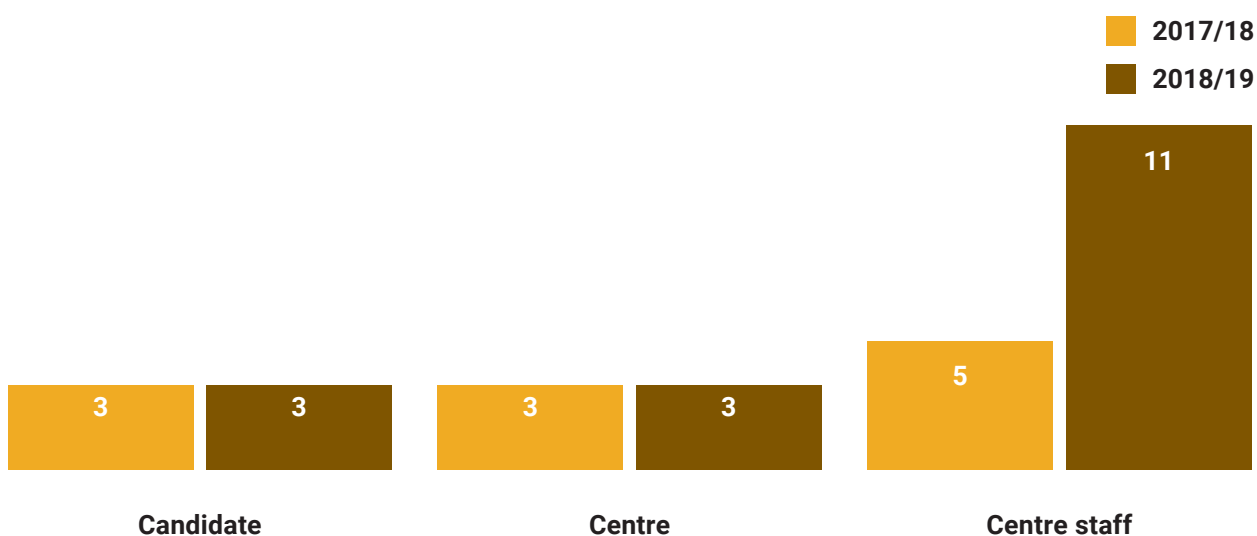
We require awarding organisations to have appropriate measures in place to prevent, investigate and deal with any instances of malpractice or maladministration. This includes arrangements with centres who may carry out investigations on their behalf. We expect awarding organisations to report to us where they believe there has been an incident of malpractice or maladministration which could invalidate an award or affect another awarding organisation.

There were 17 cases of malpractice reported to us by awarding organisations over the academic year 2018/19, compared with 11 cases in 2017/18. For both years, the most common alleged source of the malpractice was centre staff. Within this, the most common type of centre staff malpractice was improper assistance to learners, which featured in 6 out of 11 cases in 2018/19 and 3 out of 5 cases in 2017/18.

Across the other cases reported, there have been 5 instances of malpractice involving computer-based assessment, in some instances where learners had tried to circumvent online assessment security systems, and in others where centre staff had not adhered to requirements to maintain the integrity of the assessment materials.

We have started to collect malpractice data for vocational performance table qualifications, with 2017/18 data collected during September/October 2019. We are considering making regular collections of this data as part of our work to better evaluate wider system risks and issues.

Chart 5
Number of malpractice events by type

Legend: 2017/18, 2018/19

Candidate: 3, 3
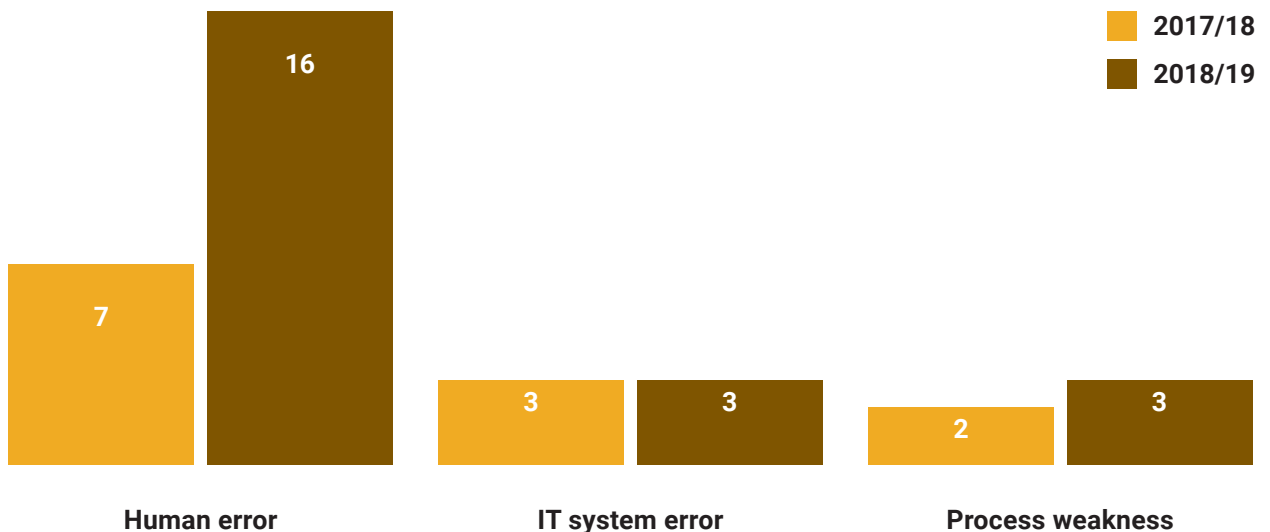Centre: 3, 3
Centre staff: 5, 11

Delivery issues

We require awarding organisations to have appropriate measures in place to ensure that assessments are delivered effectively, efficiently and to set timescales. Delivery covers a range of processes from printing and despatch of exam papers to releasing learners' results and dealing with appeals. We expect awarding organisations to report to us where there is an issue in the process of delivering an assessment that could have an impact on the validity of the assessment result. Equally, there may be other circumstances in which there is the potential for, or an actual adverse effect as a result of a delivery issue. For example, where a delivery failure causes a delay to the issue of results, creating a potential impact on progression to further education or employment.

There were 22 delivery issues reported in 2018/19, compared with 12 in 2017/18. The most prevalent type of delivery issue in both periods was due to human error, with 7 out of 12 cases in 2017/18 and 16 out of 22 cases in 2018/19. In 5 of these cases (across the two years), it was human error in the setting up of IT systems that had caused the issue, leading to delays in the issue of results, learners taking the wrong exam or not being able to take the exam at all. For the remaining 18 cases of human error, 6 were due to errors made in centres, for example, in administering assessments, and 12 were due to errors made by awarding organisation staff or third party contractors.

Chart 6
Number of delivery issues by cause

Legend: ■ 2017/18 ■ 2018/19

- Human error: 7 (2017/18), 16 (2018/19)
- IT system error: 3 (2017/18), 3 (2018/19)
- Process weakness: 2 (2017/18), 3 (2018/19)

Case study 6

In May 2018, an awarding organisation reported that exam materials for 5 qualifications had been dispatched late and may not arrive at centres in time for the scheduled exam.

As a contingency measure, the awarding organisation sent the relevant exam materials to each centre via secure electronic transfer so they would be able to print them in case the dispatched copies did not arrive in time. The awarding organisation confirmed that all centres except one had received the exam materials in time for the start of the exams. The centre that did not receive the papers in time was still able to hold its exams on the same morning and the awarding organisation provided assurances that they would take appropriate action to mitigate any disadvantage suffered by learners.

The awarding organisation found that the original issue had been caused by a combination of delays in the assessment material production process, some of which were caused by the awarding organisation itself and others by third party contractors. In order to prevent recurrence, the awarding organisation confirmed a number of changes to enhance its visibility and tracking of production.

Case study 7

In June 2019, an awarding organisation reported that some centres were having difficulties accessing an online assessment. There was an issue with the third party system in administering the assessment which had prevented these centres from accessing it.

The awarding organisation instructed these centres to switch to the paper-based versions of the assessment which they supply as standard in the event there is any issue with the online version. They carried out an investigation with their third party supplier in relation to the root cause of the issue, and an analysis of learner performance, once marking had been completed, to check whether there had been any adverse effect as a result of the disruption to the assessment.

The awarding organisation confirmed that its third party supplier would be carrying out a full infrastructure review and that regular meetings would be held with them to ensure that the outcome of this was satisfactory and appropriate action taken ahead of delivery in 2020. They also confirmed that there had been no evidence to suggest that learner performance had been impacted by the incident.

Incorrect results

We expect awarding organisations to mark and award all assessments accurately and to issue results which reflect the performance of each learner. Errors can be identified by awarding organisations or centres at the time of issue, or through the appeals process. These data refer to those errors discovered around the time of issue.

Incorrect results could occur as a result of a processing error, incorrect adding up of marks or an assessor's unreasonable exercise of judgement. The processing errors about which we were notified were entirely down to administrative error in 2017/18 and 2018/19. Over the two years, the main types reported were 6 cases of human error in the recording of learners' marks or grades, 7 cases of an IT system error and 4 cases where results were released in error before validation checks had been carried out.

We take the issue of incorrect results, regardless of their cause, very seriously as it could result in a number of adverse effects including if it gives rise to prejudice to the learner(s), or adversely affects the standard of the qualification and confidence in qualifications in general.

Chart 7
Number of incorrect results by type

2017/18
2018/19

16

7

Marker / administrative error
Incorrect results
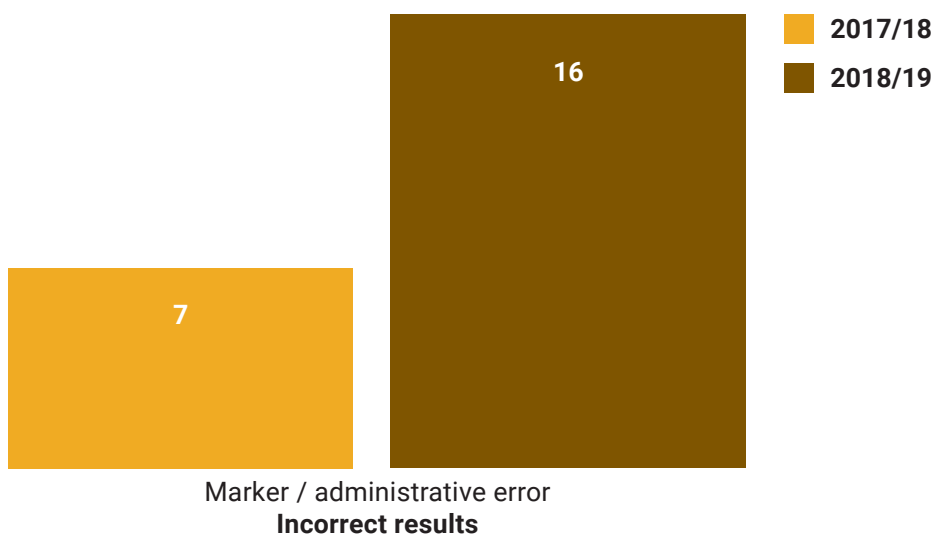
Case study 8

In May 2019, an awarding organisation reported that a learner had received a pass grade for their exam in error as the examiner had recorded grades for 2 tasks which the learner had not completed.

The awarding organisation corrected the result upon discovery of the error and undertook to review the examiner's marking for the remaining learners at the centre to ensure further errors had not been made. They also carried out wider checks to identify any other learners who may not have completed all the required tasks.

The awarding organisation confirmed that this was a data entry issue and had occurred when the examiner was transferring grades into their system. As well as further training for examiners to reinforce the importance of the process of checking that grades are accurately recorded, the awarding organisation is undertaking a longer term piece of work which aims to remove the data entry requirements from examiners.

Case study 9

In May 2019, an awarding organisation reported that 2 learners had received incorrect grades as they were not awarded a mark when the mark scheme for the exam indicated that they should have been. This errror was discovered at the awarding meeting, where grade boundaries were being set. But due to administrative error, the learners' grades were not corrected before results were issued.

The awarding organisation corrected the results upon discovery of the error and undertook to review quality of marking indicators for the examiner who had carried out the marking and a sample of the other scripts they had marked. No further marking issues were found.

The awarding organisation issued reminder communications around best practice for marking to their examiners and made changes to their processes so the administrative error which did not pick up the issue before release of results would be prevented from reoccurring.

Other events

There were a small number of events reported to us which did not fit with one of our pre-defined categories. This included a grading issue for some qualifications which were awarded for the first time in summer 2019 (see Ofqual's report on standards).

An awarding organisation found during its awarding process that learners' outcomes were significantly higher, and grading was more generous across the cohort, than it had predicted on the basis of learners' prior attainment. As a result, the awarding organisation decided to make adjustments to most of its grading points in order to ensure appropriate grade standards that could be maintained year on year. A complicating factor was that the awarding organisation had set out definitive grading points in its specifications with the indication that any changes would be made in time for the start of teaching. Therefore, learners and centres were not expecting this late change.

The awarding organisation analysed the likely impact of these changes for all learners who had taken an exam earlier in the year, but who had chosen not to resit in the summer. In the vast majority of cases, they found that learners' overall grades would not have improved as a result of the changes. In a small number of cases, however, their analysis showed that learners would have been likely to have achieved a higher grade if they had resat their exam under the new grading rules. These learners were issued with a revised grade, to minimise any disadvantage incurred. The awarding organisation also contacted all colleges to make them aware of the changes so they could take these into account when reviewing learners' performance and making decisions about places.

The action that the awarding organisation took to set standards at the overall cohort level was appropriate, although it is nonetheless regrettable that learners and centres were not aware earlier that changes to grading points were a possibility in order to ensure that standards are set and maintained appropriately. In response to this, we have reminded all awarding organisations to ensure that they have in place appropriately clear statements about potential changes they might make to grading rules.

Conclusions and next steps

We consider that most awarding organisations that have reported events to us over 2017/18 and 2018/19 have managed these effectively. That is, they have managed each issue, acted appropriately to protect the interests of learners, identified root causes and put in place sufficient steps to prevent recurrence.

We have concerns about some individual awarding organisations in terms of events reported to us which we are following up in order to secure improvements in their performance in time for when their assessments are next delivered. Our concerns around events extend to:

- repetition of issues from 2018 to 2019, for example, in the number of assessment material errors
- the handling of specific issues, for example, some malpractice cases
- the quality of awarding organisations' communication to us, giving us timely notification and all relevant information so we may fully assess each case

In response to the overall trend for assessment material errors being the most common type of event reported over the 2 years, we are currently carrying out a programme of audits looking at the strategies that some awarding organisations employ to mitigate the effects of assessment material errors. We will use the findings to inform action we might require awarding organisations to take to reduce any risks to the safe delivery and awarding of qualifications next year.

We are currently consulting on a new regulatory framework for Key Stage 4 Technical Awards which we plan to use to evaluate qualifications that are submitted to be included in performance tables from 2023. We will be reviewing the outcomes from our evaluation of qualifications to inform our risk assessment when they start to be delivered from 2021.

As we did in 2018 and 2019, we plan to review awarding organisations' readiness for assessments in 2020. We also plan on expanding our data collection in order to get a more complete picture of the scale and scope of the qualifications and assessments being delivered and any further risks or issues this might raise.

Letter to awarding organisations ahead of the delivery of external assessments in summer 2018, sent 4 May 2018

Dear Responsible Officer,

I am writing to you to set out our expectations about your delivery of external assessment in vocational qualifications included in the Department for Education (DfE) performance tables for 2018, and our approach to monitoring this. We recognise that these qualifications may also be available to learners in Wales and Northern Ireland, and the regulators in these jurisdictions (Qualifications Wales and CCEA) support our expectations.

We know that all AOs offering vocational performance table qualifications will be delivering external assessments at some point during this summer, be they on-demand assessments or as part of a defined summer assessment series or session. This means there will be higher volumes of assessments and scripts in the system this summer. Therefore, we will monitor and manage the risks to delivery more closely, starting from summer 2018.

We know that you, like us, want the delivery of these assessments to run smoothly. We recognise that in such a complex and high volume delivery system it is impossible to eradicate all risk of issues occurring. Our priority during this summer is to ensure that where these arise you deal with them promptly and appropriately.

Management of risks and incidents
We expect that you will already have taken all reasonable steps to identify the risks associated with the delivery of external assessment and that you have appropriate contingency plans in place to prevent or mitigate any Adverse Effects.

We plan to talk to some of you to review the extent to which you have identified and are managing the risks to safe delivery of the external assessments. This will be based on the volume of entries you anticipate. We will be in touch once we have reviewed your provisional entry data which has been requested by our data team for 10th May 2018. We do not expect the discussion to last more than two hours, and you will have the option to have a teleconference or a Skype call, instead of a face to face meeting with us.

Notifying us about events
In accordance with Condition B3, you must tell us promptly if you believe an event has occurred, or is likely to occur, that could lead to a potential or actual Adverse Effect. You should also have regard to our Guidance to Condition B3, which sets out when and how you should notify us of an event.
Here are some examples of particular types of issues that we expect you to notify us of:
• We recognise that there will be minor or isolated events that cause a disturbance or disruption to the delivery of an assessment, such as an individual school or college experiencing unexpected fire alarms during an exam. We understand that you will deal with these cases in line with established procedures so that they will not cause prejudice to learners, or adversely affect standards or public confidence in qualifications. However, we would expect you to notify us promptly where an event occurs out of the ordinary and could cause a significant and / or uncontained disturbance or disruption, which then requires you or your centres to follow a specific course of action.
• We expect you to notify us promptly where exam scripts are confirmed missing (e.g. destroyed or stolen) before the issuing of results. We would not expect you to inform

us of instances where you become aware of missing scripts and have not finished looking for them.
- We expect you to notify us promptly about any media or social media coverage that you have assessed as having potential or actual Adverse Effect. This includes where the volume of coverage triggers you to take some form of action to monitor or respond to the potential issues raised.

We wish to minimise any unnecessary and time-consuming exchange about the information we need to consider how you are dealing with your event notifications. Therefore, we have compiled a list of the typical information we require, broken down by the most common types of events. These are set out in Annex A. This information largely reflects that set out in our published statutory guidance. The lists are not exhaustive and we may ask for additional information depending on the specifics of the event. Where you do not have the information available at the time of your notification, it would be helpful if you can set out when you expect to be able to provide additional details. If the event is complex and it would be easier to discuss the detail of it please let us know. In these cases, following discussion, we would expect the necessary notification or information in writing.

It remains your responsibility to notify the relevant regulators of any events that affect learners in more than one jurisdiction.

Now that you submit event notifications via our portal, we would also take this opportunity to emphasise the importance of completing all fields on the portal as fully as possible, but particularly in linking the relevant qualification from our Register. In terms of the vocational qualifications included in the performance tables, it is important that we can accurately identify the events related to these qualifications from their titles, and assess and manage these events without delay.

Assessment material errors
You must continue to notify us promptly of assessment material errors (including in modified or braille papers) in accordance with Condition B3.

This summer we will consider any assessment material error in assessments for any L1, L2 or L3 vocational qualification in the DfE performance tables to constitute a 'substantial error'. Therefore, we expect you to notify us promptly about all assessment material errors in assessments for Applied Generals, Tech Levels, Tech Certs and Tech Awards, including those for which you issue an erratum notice (to correct an error in any published material).

When you notify us about an error in your assessment materials we will categorise the error using the definitions below.

Category 1
Assessment material errors which could or do make it impossible for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task
Category 2
Assessment material errors which could or do cause unintentional difficulties for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task
Category 3
Assessment material errors which will not affect a learner's ability to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

Provision of assessment materials
For this summer, we are requesting you to provide us with all assessment materials,

including question papers, task briefs and supporting materials for all Level 3 Applied General and Tech Level qualifications, after the relevant assessment has been taken. For the avoidance of doubt, we do not require you to provide us with assessment materials for Level 1 and 2 vocational qualifications that are included in performance tables this summer, unless we specifically ask for them.

We appreciate that you will likely need to discuss the logistics of this with us, according to how your individual assessments operate, for example, if these are on-demand or taken online as a computer-based test. Your named contact will be in touch to discuss this with you (details below).

One option would be for you to provide us with access to the secure areas of your website to provide us with access to your assessment materials. Alternatively, you can upload them securely to our portal the morning after the relevant assessment takes place, or as arranged according to your individual assessment regime.

We will not review these materials unless we have cause to believe that there has been an issue with the assessment. We may keep the assessment materials for other purposes but we will always inform you of this prior to using them. If we wish to review any mark schemes, we will make a request for them separately.

Our approach to monitoring your delivery
We will continue to acknowledge and monitor any notifications you send to us.

We will leave you to manage the event once we have information about the nature, scale and impact of the event, and we have sufficient assurance that you are managing it appropriately. We will close the event notification as soon as we are assured that the event itself has been contained, and that you have sufficiently prevented or mitigated any Adverse Effects. This does not mean that we will not carry out further work or actions after the summer to address any outstanding thematic or compliance issues.

We may intervene if we believe your approach is inadequate or inappropriate, or if we believe you are likely to breach your Conditions. Depending on the nature of the event and the urgency with which it must be dealt, we may
• Give you the opportunity to review your approach in light of our concerns; and /or
• Direct you to take a specific course of action.

Where appropriate, we will strive to monitor your delivery in a coordinated way with the other qualification regulators.

In July and September, we will provide you with interim updates on the trends and patterns we have observed; and we may ask you for further information on the way in which you have delivered the summer series.

Your named contact
Your named contact at Ofqual for any matter related to the delivery and performance of assessments during the summer is: XX

Should you wish to discuss an issue you do not consider to be notifiable, or any complex event notification with us, you should approach your named contact (either by telephone or through the Portal) to arrange for a meeting or phone call. We will respond to you as soon as possible, and, if required, we will arrange for a teleconference or meeting to take place within 24 hours of your e-mail.

We would encourage you to keep us updated verbally on an emerging situation even if you do not consider it to be officially notifiable under Condition B3, for example, about delays in marking progress.

If an issue continues to escalate to a point where you believe it is notifiable under Condition B3, you should notify us via the Portal.

Setting and maintaining standards
We will want to ensure fair awarding of the qualifications so that learners in summer 2018 are not unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged. We will write to you separately about this.

Reporting
We will publish a report on the issues that occur during the summer. We will give you an opportunity to provide feedback on the report's factual accuracy before we publish.

Letter to awarding organisations ahead of the delivery of external assessments in summer 2019, sent 10 May 2019

Dear Responsible Officer,

I am writing to set out our expectations about your delivery of Performance Table qualifications this summer and how this will be monitored. Where your qualifications are available to learners in Wales and Northern Ireland, the regulators in these jurisdictions (Qualifications Wales and CCEA) support our expectations.

Management of risks and incidents
We know that you, like us, want the delivery of these assessments to run smoothly. We expect you to have already taken all reasonable steps to identify the risks associated with the summer series and to have appropriate contingency plans in place to prevent or mitigate any Adverse Effect. We expect you to deal with any issues that arise promptly and effectively.

Notifying us about events
In accordance with your General Conditions of Recognition (GCR), you must tell us promptly if you believe an event has occurred, or is likely to occur, that could lead to a potential or actual Adverse Effect (GCR B3). You should also have regard to our Guidance, which sets out when you should notify us of an event. You should make any notification through our Portal.

In previous years we highlighted particular types of issues which we consider notifiable and we continue to expect you to notify us about those types of issues this year:
- We expect you to notify us promptly about any out of the ordinary event, or one affecting a number of centres, that could cause a significant and / or uncontained disturbance or disruption, which then requires you or your centres to follow a specific course of action (for example, unusual disturbance or disruption to the delivery of an assessment, cyber security issues, etc).
- We expect you to notify us promptly where scripts are confirmed missing (e.g. destroyed or stolen) before the issuing of results or before you conduct a review of marking or moderation.
- We expect you to notify us promptly about any potential for, or actual, media or social media coverage that would have a potential or actual Adverse Effect. This includes where the volume of coverage triggers you to take some form of action to monitor or respond to the potential issues raised.

We wish to minimise any unnecessary and time-consuming exchanges. So, where you do not have the information available at the time of your notification, please set out when you expect to be able to provide additional details. If the event is complex and it would be easier to have a discussion, please let us know and we are happy to discuss. We would then expect the necessary notification or information via the Portal. To help you understand the type of information we consider helpful we have provided a list of the common questions we ask.

As you know, it is important that you also complete the fields on the Portal as fully as possible, but particularly in linking to the relevant qualification from the Register. In terms of the vocational qualifications included in the performance tables, it is important that we can accurately identify the relevant titles as being included in these categories when we come to assess and manage any events. This aids our consideration of how you are dealing with any issue and our subsequent reporting.

Assessment material errors

You must continue to notify us promptly of assessment material errors (including in modified or Braille papers) in accordance with Condition B3.

We expect you to notify us promptly about all assessment material errors in these assessments, including those for which you issue an erratum notice or replacement paper. We will also continue to collect data about all assessment material errors for these qualifications after the summer.

When you notify us about an error in your assessment materials we will categorise the error using the definitions below. We have retained the wording we used in previous years.

Category 1
Assessment material errors which could or do make it impossible for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

Category 2
Assessment material errors which could or do cause unintentional difficulties for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

Category 3
Assessment material errors which will not affect a learner's ability to generate a meaningful response to a question / task

Provision of assessment materials

This year, we will not expect you to routinely provide us with all of your assessment materials at the time of the assessment. However, should you have an assessment material error, we expect you to report this to us as above and upload the relevant question (and any associated diagrams graphs etc.) to the appropriate Event Notification on the portal. On occasion, we may request to see the entire paper, this will be done via our secure area on the Portal and your named contact will liaise with you about how to upload the materials.

Our approach to monitoring your delivery

We will continue to acknowledge and monitor any notifications you send to us. We will leave you to manage the event once we have information about the nature, scale and impact of the event, and we have sufficient assurance that you are managing it appropriately. We will close the event notification as soon as we are assured that the event itself has been contained, and that you have sufficiently prevented or mitigated any Adverse Effects. We may carry out further work or actions after the summer to address any outstanding thematic or compliance issues.

We may intervene if we believe your approach is inadequate or inappropriate, or if we believe you are likely to breach your Conditions. Depending on the nature of the event and the urgency with which it must be dealt, we may
- Give you the opportunity to review your approach in light of our concerns; and/or
- Direct you to take a specific course of action.

Where appropriate, we will monitor your delivery in a coordinated way with the other qualification regulators. We will provide you with interim updates on the trends and patterns we have observed; and we may ask you for further information on the way in which you have delivered your Performance Table qualifications.

Your named contact

Your named contact at Ofqual for any matter related to the delivery and performance of the summer series is: XX.

Should you wish to discuss an emerging issue which you do not yet consider to be notifiable, or any complex event notification with us, you should approach your named contact (either by telephone or through the Portal) to arrange for a meeting or phone call. We will respond to you as soon as possible, and, if required, we will arrange for a teleconference or meeting to take place within one working day.

Setting and maintaining standards
We will want to ensure fair awarding of the qualifications so that learners are not unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged. We will write to you separately about this if applicable to you.

Reporting
It is our intention to publish a report on the issues that occur with the delivery of Performance Table qualifications and will be requesting some contextual information about these qualifications at the end of the summer. We will give you an opportunity to provide feedback on the report's factual accuracy before we publish.