

Special consideration in GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2017 exam series

Background information accompanying the statistical release



6 December 2017

Ofqual/17/6306/2

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Information about the statistics

Purpose

This release presents figures on the number of special consideration requests for GCSEs, AS and A levels submitted by schools and colleges to exam boards for exams and non-timetabled assessments sat in summer 2017.

Geographical coverage

This report presents data on special consideration requests in England. Reports published in previous years included data for learners in Wales and Northern Ireland as well. As such, historical figures in this year's report reflect England only data and may therefore differ from previously published figures.

For this, and all other releases for the academic year 2016/17, Ofqual will publish separate data tables for learners in Wales and Northern Ireland without commentary, in addition to data tables and the report for England. This is following a [transition arrangement](#) with Qualifications Wales (the regulator in Wales) and CCEA (the regulator in Northern Ireland) whereby the responsibility for publishing data for learners in Wales and Northern Ireland for the academic year 2017/18 and beyond has been passed to each.

Five exam boards offer GCSE and GCE qualifications in England, Wales and/or Northern Ireland:

- AQA Education (AQA)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
- Pearson Education Ltd. (Pearson)
- WJEC-CBAC Ltd. (WJEC)

Description

The qualifications covered in this release are regulated by Ofqual, Qualifications Wales or CCEA. Each qualifications regulator publishes conditions¹ that set out the requirements that the exam boards it regulates have to meet. These conditions state that "An awarding organisation must have in place clear arrangements for Special

¹ Conditions in [England, Northern Ireland](#) and [Wales](#)

Consideration to be given to learners in relation to qualifications which it makes available.” In this release, special consideration refers to a post-examination adjustment to a candidate’s mark or grade to reflect temporary illness or injury, or some other event outside their control, which has had, or is reasonably likely to have had, a material effect on their ability to take an assessment or demonstrate their level of attainment in an assessment.

Special consideration requests relate to a single request for a candidate sitting a specific unit or component in an exam. In 2017, data was also collected on individual applications and group applications. Individual applications refer to an application from one candidate which can encompass either one or more units for that candidate. Group applications refer to an application which can encompass more than one candidate if they have been affected by the same circumstance. In this case a group application can cover all the candidates and the potentially affected assessments.

Ofqual’s guide on [Regulating GCSEs, AS and A levels](#) highlights the types of special consideration which include:

- extra marks for a candidate whose exam performance is affected by temporary illness, injury or unforeseen incident;
- awarding the qualification even though the student has not completed all the assessments that would normally be required.

In other cases, special consideration takes the form of an adjustment to the way an assessment is taken. We report on that form of special consideration in our statistics on access arrangements. The [Joint Council for Qualifications \(JCQ\)](#) defines access arrangements as pre-examination adjustments for candidates based on evidence of need and normal way of working. Access arrangements allow candidates/learners with special educational needs, disabilities or temporary injuries or illness to access the assessment without changing the demands of the assessment. Examples of access arrangements include readers, scribes and Braille question papers. Data on this category of adjustments is published by Ofqual in another publication ([Access Arrangements for GCSE and A level](#)).

Each qualifications regulator requires the exam boards to publish details of their arrangements for giving special consideration, which must include how a candidate qualifies for special consideration and what special consideration will be given. The regulators do not prescribe the processes and procedures the exam boards use to make decisions about special consideration applications. This is because the circumstances of each application may be unique, and it is for the exam boards to decide if and what consideration should be given under the circumstances, and in a fair and consistent way.

JCQ publishes [guidance and procedures on special consideration](#). There may be small changes year-on-year to this document that reflect the procedures in place for particular examination series.

Adjustments may be given to candidates who were present for an assessment but disadvantaged due to temporary injury, illness, indisposition or other unforeseen incident occurring immediately before or during the assessment period. JCQ's procedures allow for only relatively minor adjustments to a candidate's mark – up to 5% of the maximum mark of a question paper. Mark adjustment data was first available separately for England, Wales and Northern Ireland from 2016 onwards.

Examples of cases where percentage adjustments can be made are highlighted below:

5% – reserved for the most exceptional cases, such as recent death of a family member or terminal illness;

4% – applies to problems that are very serious, such as a severe disease or injury;

3% – more cases tend to fall under this and can include recent traumatic experience or domestic crisis;

2% – this includes candidates who have an illness at the time of assessment or extreme stress on the day of the examination;

1% – this is for more minor problems such as noise during the examination or minor ailments

0% – the application was reviewed, but the addition of marks was deemed inappropriate. This might happen when an exam board approves the reason for the request, but not all instances of candidates or their assessments within it. For example, they may consider that a recent traumatic event should only receive special consideration for the assessment taken within three weeks of the event and not for assessments taken after that time period.

Each application must be assessed on its merits, and the exam board's decision should be based on various factors, including the severity of the circumstances, the date of the exam in relation to the circumstances, and the nature of the assessment.

External influences (England)

There are various factors which might have influenced the number of special consideration requests made for GCSEs and A level assessments given in this release:

- The move towards linear assessment could, at least in part, explain the increase in requests. Because of linearisation, candidates may apply for special

consideration if there are extenuating circumstances as there is no longer a resit opportunity for individual units.

- Previously, affected candidates were required to have taken a minimum 40% of the assessment in order for an either a mark adjustment or qualification award to be applied to the candidate's final grade. According to [JCQ guidance](#), from summer 2017, a student must have completed at least 25% of the assessment to be eligible for special consideration. This was partly in response to the move to linear qualifications and partly in response to tragic events that took place this year, leading to awarding organisations reviewing and lowering the requirement (see [JCQ statement](#)).
- The number of GCSE English literature and English language entries has increased as other level 1/2 qualifications in these subjects are no longer included in school league tables (see [Ofqual's statistical release on summer 2017 entries](#)). Changes to performance tables also mean that these are particularly high stakes qualifications. Because of this, candidates may apply for special consideration if there are extenuating circumstances.
- Some reformed GCSEs comprise more exams than the previous qualifications, which could mean that there are more exams potentially affected and in respect of which students are eligible for special consideration. This may contribute to more special consideration requests as there are higher numbers entering these subjects.

External influences (Wales and Northern Ireland)

The policy contexts in [Wales and Northern Ireland](#) are different from England in a number of ways. For example, the governments of Wales and Northern Ireland have retained the unitised structure in some GCSEs as well as grades A* to G, and schools and colleges in Wales and Northern Ireland are still able to enter students for exams in the winter exam series in some subjects; in Wales and Northern Ireland, reformed AS qualifications contribute 40% of the total marks of the full A level.

Data source

The exam boards send Ofqual data on the number of requests for special consideration and their approvals.

This was the first year when Ofqual collected data at candidate level and by subject for special consideration requests.

From 2016 onwards the number of non-timetabled assessments have also been reported along with the number of scripts marked.

Data for AS and A level have been combined in this release.

Limitations

There is potential for error in the information provided by exam boards, therefore Ofqual cannot guarantee that the information received is correct. However, Ofqual conducts various quality assurance checks which are outlined in the 'quality assurance' section below.

Data tables for Northern Ireland accompanying this release are presented at aggregate level (ie not at candidate level) as CCEA (awarding body) was not able to submit data at candidate level this year. We expect CCEA to submit data at candidate level next year.

Withdrawn requests refer to requests that were withdrawn, which are instances where exam boards withdraw the original application and ask the centre to reapply, at which point it is treated as a new application. However, only 1% of the total number of requests were withdrawn. To aid comparison with previous years we have kept withdrawn requests in the total number of requests.

For candidates that are 'absent with good reason', when a unit has subcomponents exam boards count each subcomponent as being more than one application for special consideration. Pearson followed a different approach up to and including 2016, counting a unit with subcomponents as being one application for special consideration. For 2017, Pearson's data has been counted in the same way as other exam boards.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance procedures are carried out as explained in the [Quality Assurance Framework for Statistical Publications](#) published by Ofqual to ensure the accuracy of the data and to challenge or question it, where necessary. Ofqual continuously manages this process by:

- ensuring that data providers are clear about what is required of them – a process helped by ensuring that providers are fully consulted during the initial design phase and for any subsequent change;
- reminding all providers (if appropriate) that, as a condition of them being regulated, all data must be completely accurate;
- being alert to unexpected changes in the data submitted by comparing individual returns over time from the same provider;
- actively challenging any unexpected results with the data providers; and
- having a proportionate data-auditing framework in place, allowing for auditing of providers' information collection, collation and delivery processes as necessary, using a wide range of tools from questionnaires to on-site process audits.

Publication may be deferred if the statistics are not considered fit for purpose.

Revisions

Once published, data on special considerations are not usually subject to revision, although subsequent releases may be revised to insert late data or to correct an error.

Confidentiality and rounding

To ensure confidentiality of the accompanying data, all figures for the number of special consideration requests are rounded to the nearest 5. Figures below 5 (1 to 4) appear as '0~' and '0' refers to cases where there are zero values relating to the number of requests, approvals and individual or group applications.

As a result of rounded figures, the percentages (calculated on actual figures) shown in any tables may not necessarily add up to 100. Percentages have been rounded up to one decimal place in the report and accompanying data tables.

Status

These statistics are classified as official statistics.

Related publications

A number of other statistical releases and publications relate to this one:

- [Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\) collection](#)
- [Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment collection](#)
- [Statistical Release: Access Arrangements for GCSE and A Level: 2016/17 Academic Year](#): this statistical release published by Ofqual gives statistics on access arrangements in GCSE and A level for the 2016 to 2017 academic year.

Statistical policies

The [policies and procedures](#) that Ofqual follows for production and release of its statistical releases are available publicly.

Glossary

Definitions of important terms used in this release are [available online](#).

Useful links

The [report and data tables](#) accompanying this release are available separately.

Feedback

We welcome your feedback on our publications. Should you have any comments on this statistical release and how to improve it to meet your needs please contact us at statistics@ofqual.gov.uk.

We wish to make our publications widely accessible. Please contact us at publications@ofqual.gov.uk if you have any specific accessibility requirements.



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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at:

Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation

Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344

Textphone 0300 303 3345

Helpline 0300 303 3346