

Reviews of marking and moderation resulting in grade changes of two grades or more

Summer 2017 examination series – England



December 2017

Ofqual/17/6327

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Executive summary

Grade changes of two grades or more at qualification level are rare when considered in the context of the number of post-results reviews and the number of qualifications awarded each exam series. In summer 2017, 6,596,105¹ GCSE, AS, and A level qualifications were awarded in England, and 1969 qualifications had a grade change of two grades or more. While this represents less than 0.03% of all qualifications awarded, grade changes of two grades or more are more likely to represent unacceptable error in the system. The number of qualifications with a grade change of two or more grades has increased on those in 2016 (where less than 0.01% of all qualifications awarded had grade changes of 2 or more). This increase is driven by grade changes of 2 or more in English GCSE subjects.

Grade changes of two grades or more are typically the result of a large mark change. This 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. However, it is evident that some grade changes of two grades or more are due to small mark changes, in particular, when grades change from a B to an A* at A level.

Grade changes of two grades or more are more prevalent in some qualification types and subjects than others. In summer 2017, grade changes of two grades or more are predominantly in English subjects. This is likely to reflect the structure and nature of assessments in this subject area, since English subject assessments are inherently more challenging to mark. Other subjects commonly associated with grade changes of 2 or more in 2017 are art & design, health and social care, religious studies and design and technology.

The most common reasons for grade changes of two grades or more, as provided by the exam boards, related to marking error and issues with original moderation that were corrected at review. Administrative errors were also reported. We intend to continue collecting data on reviews of marking and moderation that result in grade changes of two grades or more each summer to allow us to identify any emerging trends over time.

We have previously taken a view that a change of two or more grades represents a marking error (with the exception of a change from B to A* at A level which can be the result of a one-mark change). However, this is less clear cut this year, and it may be that some of the large mark changes are the result of a number of small mark changes on a number of items or components which do not represent marking errors.

¹ This figure, and figures relating to qualification grades challenged and changed, throughout this report are rounded to the nearest five wherever referred to.

It seems that efforts to embed the [revised rules for reviews](#) have varied by exam board and subject and that some reviewers changed marks where there was no error with the original marking.

Background and introduction

Since summer 2015, Ofqual has collected detailed data on post-results review of marking and moderation services, including additional data for students whose qualification result changed by 2 grades or more. This report provides an overview of the data relating to qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more for GCSEs, AS, and A levels in England², in summer 2017, for qualifications with units that have been submitted to post-results clerical check, review of marking and review of moderation services³. The report relates to data collected from AQA, OCR, Pearson, and WJEC/Eduqas, and refers to reviews at both the unit and qualification level. The report also provides more information about the reasons for the grade changes⁴.

In summer 2017, there was increased use of post-results marking and moderation services⁵ compared to summer 2016. This was driven by reviews in GCSE qualifications. A total of 6,596,105 GCSE, AS, and A level qualifications were awarded in England and unit⁶ level reviews relating to 369,210 qualification grades⁷ were challenged. Of these, 88,505 qualifications had their grades changed,

² Analysis from 2015 was published in May 2016 and includes data from England, Northern Ireland, and Wales (see https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/526068/Analysis_-_grade_change_of_2_or_more.pdf). From 2016 onwards, data is reported for England only. Analysis from 2016 was published in July 2017 (see https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/633236/Ofqual-17-6254-RoMM_2_grades_Ofqual_2017.pdf).

³ Because special consideration marks are applied to the qualification mark post review, this report includes qualifications that have had special consideration applied if contributing units have been submitted for a review and had a grade change of 2 or more.

⁴ Exam boards are currently required to record reasons for reviews of marking decisions and to provide them to centres on request. From 2020, exam boards will be required to provide reasons for reviews of marking decisions to centres automatically (see <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-regulations-for-enquiries-and-appeals>). Exam boards have already begun implementing this.

⁵ Collectively referred to throughout this report as 'reviews' and formerly known as enquiries about results.

⁶ Qualifications consist of multiple units or components. They are referred to as units throughout this report.

⁷ Reviews 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.

representing 24% of all grades challenged and 1.3% of all grades awarded. The vast majority of grade changes were by one grade. However, 1,969 qualifications had grade changes of 2 grades or more⁸. This represents a very small proportion of all grades challenged, 0.5%, and 2.2% of all grades changed. There were more grade changes of 2 or more in 2017 compared to in 2016, when 401 qualification grades changed by 2 or more grades. This represented 0.1% of all grades challenged. This increase is predominantly driven by an increase in English subject qualifications (particularly at GCSE), with 80% of all grade changes of 2 or more being in these subjects in 2017, compared to 29% in 2016.

Service types associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more

In total, there were 3,382 unit reviews relating⁹ to qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more for GCSEs, AS, and A levels in summer 2017. Grade changes of 2 grades or more were most frequently associated with reviews of marking (service 2 or service 2 priority requests), followed by reviews of moderation (service 3), and clerical checks¹⁰ (service 1; see Table 1). This pattern remained consistent when only units where a raw mark¹¹ change had occurred were considered (ie units that actually contributed to the grade change).

Table 1. *Number of reviews by service type involved in qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more*

Service	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews with raw mark change	% of unit reviews with raw mark changes
Service 1	13	0.4%	8	0.3%
Service 2	2,804	83%	2,503	82%
Service 2 priority	64	2%	54	2%

⁸ A total of 1974 qualifications were identified as having grade changes of 2 or more grades, however we have identified that 5 of these qualification grade changes were due to mark changes outside of the review service processes covered in this report.

⁹ Not all unit reviews will have contributed to a grade change of 2 or more. If multiple units contributing to a qualification grade are submitted for review, it may be the case that some units did not have a mark change, or had a mark change in the opposite direction to the overall qualification grade change. See Table 5 for the number of units contributing to a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more.

¹⁰ Further detail about the review services can be found in the official statistics Reviews of Marking and Moderation report.

¹¹ 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 in these qualifications is awarded based on the total number of UMS marks that they achieve.

Reviews of marking and moderation - 2 grade changes or more

Service 3	501	15%	497	16%
Total	3,382	100%	3,062	100%

At AS and A level (including A level double awards), most grade changes of 2 grades or more came from reviews of moderation (service 3), while at GCSE (including short course and double awards) most came from reviews of marking (service 2). This is different from 2016, when most reviews for AS and A level qualifications were for reviews of marking (service 2), and most GCSE reviews were for reviews of moderation. There were very few qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more arising from a clerical check (service 1 review; see Table 2) as in 2016.

Table 2. Number of unit reviews by service type related to¹² qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more by qualification type

	A level		A level double		AS level		GCSE full course		GCSE double		GCSE short course	
	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews	Unit reviews	% of unit reviews
Service 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	13	0.4	0	0	0	0
Service 2	55	20	2	100	39	30	2,689	91	2	40	17	52
Service 2 priority	47	17	0	0	8	6	9	0.3	0	0	0	0
Service 3	170	63	0	0	82	64	230	8	3	60	16	48
Total	272	100	2	100	129	100	2,941	100	5	100	33	100

¹² Not all unit reviews will have contributed to a grade change of 2 or more. If multiple units contributing to a qualification grade are submitted for review, it may be the case that some units did not have a mark change, or had a mark change in the opposite direction to the overall qualification grade change. See Table 5 for the number of units contributing to a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more.

Level of qualifications with grade changes of 2 grades or more

The 3,382 unit reviews associated with a grade change of 2 grades or more in 2017 contributed towards 1,969 unique qualifications. This is less than 0.03% of the 6,596,105 GCSE and GCE qualifications awarded in England in summer 2017.

Grade changes of 2 grades or more were more common in some qualification types than others. Most grade changes of 2 grades or more occurred in GCSE full courses (Table 3; in particular in English and English literature – see Table 6).

Table 3. *Number of qualifications changed by 2 grades or more by qualification type*

Qualification	Number of qualifications challenged
A level	153
A level double	1
AS level	84
GCSE full course	1,702
GCSE double	4
GCSE short course	25
Total	1,969

Number of unit reviews associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more

Table 4 shows the number of unit reviews per qualification associated with a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more. For nearly all of the grade changes of 2 grades or more, one or two units in the qualification were reviewed.

Table 4. *Number of reviews for qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more by qualification type*

Number of unit reviews	A level	A level double	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE double	GCSE short course	Total
1	39	0	39	470	3	17	568
2	110	1	45	1,227	1	8	1,392
3	3	0	0	3	0	0	6
4	1	0	0	2	0	0	3
Total	153	1	84	1,702	4	25	1,969

Note. Some GCSE short courses are made up of just one unit.

Where there are multiple unit reviews per qualification, it is not necessarily the case that all of the reviews directly contributed to the grade change. Table 5 shows how many units in each qualification contributed to each grade change. This

demonstrates that where there were multiple unit reviews per qualification, the grade change typically resulted from changes on multiple units. There were predominantly 2 units submitted for review, for which in 78% of cases the grade change was due to a combination of raw mark changes on *both* units. This suggests that when multiple units were reviewed, grade changes of 2 grades or more were more likely to result from the cumulative effect of mark changes on multiple units, than a mark change on a single unit.

Table 5. *Number of units contributing to a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more at qualification level*

Total number of unit reviews	Number of units with raw mark change			Total
	1	2	3	
1	568	0	0	568
2	300	1,092	0	1,392
3	2	2	2	6
4	1	2	0	3

Subject areas with grade changes of 2 grades or more

Overall, the subjects most commonly associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more were English (including English/English language/English literature), art and design (all endorsements), health and social care, religious studies, and design and technology (all endorsements; Table 6). These five subjects account for 96% of all qualifications that changed by 2 grades or more in summer 2017. To some extent, these patterns are likely to represent the nature of the subjects. For example English, the subject area that had the most grade changes of 2 grades or more, includes long essay questions that are central to the validity of the assessment, and are more challenging to mark.

Table 6. *Number of qualifications with grade changes of 2 grades or more by subject and qualification type (5 most frequent subjects)*

Subject area	A level	A level double	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE double	GCSE short course	Total
English	35	0	10	1,523	0	0	1,568
Art and design subjects	87	0	47	81	0	8	223
Health and social care	0	0	0	44	3	0	47

Religious studies	4	0	1	9	0	17	31
Design and technology	2	0	0	15	0	0	17

Magnitude of grade changes

As in 2015 and 2016, the majority of grade changes of 2 grades or more were increases of 2 grades, regardless of the qualification type (Table 7). Indeed, grade changes of more than 2 grades were rare, representing 101 cases out of nearly 7 million qualifications that were awarded in summer 2017.

There was one instance of a grade changing by 6 grades at GCSE (full course). This was due to an administrative error on one unit whereby not all of the work had been seen by the original examiner. There were two instances of a qualification grade changing by 5 grades in GCSE (full course). One of these was due to an administrative error by the centre who input 0 (instead of the mark) for an internally assessed (i.e non-examined) unit. The second instance of the grade change by 5 grades was due to an administrative error *and* a marking error on an examined unit.

Grade changes of 2 grades or more were typically in an upwards direction (1956, out of 1969, of all grade changes of 2 grades or more). There were 13 cases where the grade decreased and these were all by 2 grades. In the context of large grade changes, the patterns observed are perhaps not unexpected, since reviews are more likely to be submitted for students who have received a much lower grade than anticipated.

Table 7. *Magnitude of grade changes at qualification level*

Grade change	A level	A level double	AS level	GCSE full course	GCSE double	GCSE short course	Total
Two grades down	0	0	1	12	0	0	13
Two grades up	145	1	83	1,599	4	23	1,855
Three grades up	8	0	0	80	0	2	90
Four grades up	0	0	0	8	0	0	8
Five grades up	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Six grades up	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Total	153	1	84	1,702	4	25	1,969

Qualification mark changes associated with a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more

In addition to the magnitude of the grade changes, the change in raw marks at qualification level that resulted in a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more were also analysed¹³. While this provides some insight into the scale of any mark changes, there are a number of factors to be considered. For example, when considering changes in raw marks, it is difficult to make comparisons across qualifications, because, dependent on the grade boundaries, each qualification will require a different change in the number of raw marks to bring about a grade change¹⁴.

¹³ For modular qualifications raw marks are converted to uniform mark scale (UMS) marks so that marks can be combined across examination series. A student's subject grade is then awarded based on the total number of UMS marks that they achieve. There are no UMS marks for reformed linear GCSE, AS or A level qualifications (reformed AS levels were introduced in some subjects from 2016, and reformed GCSE and A levels in 2017). As such, in 2017 only 258 grade changes of 2 or more, that is 13% of all qualifications with grade changes of 2 grades or more, had UMS marks. The analysis of UMS mark changes contributing to grade changes of 2 grades or more is therefore not considered in this report.

¹⁴ For modular qualifications for which the qualification grade is dependent on UMS marks, one raw mark will also not equate to the same number of UMS marks for every qualification.

Bearing these issues in mind, Figure 1 shows a summary of the raw mark changes¹⁵ at qualification level that resulted in a qualification grade change of 2 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 -53 to +64 raw marks. On average, there was an absolute raw mark change of 19.34 for these qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more.

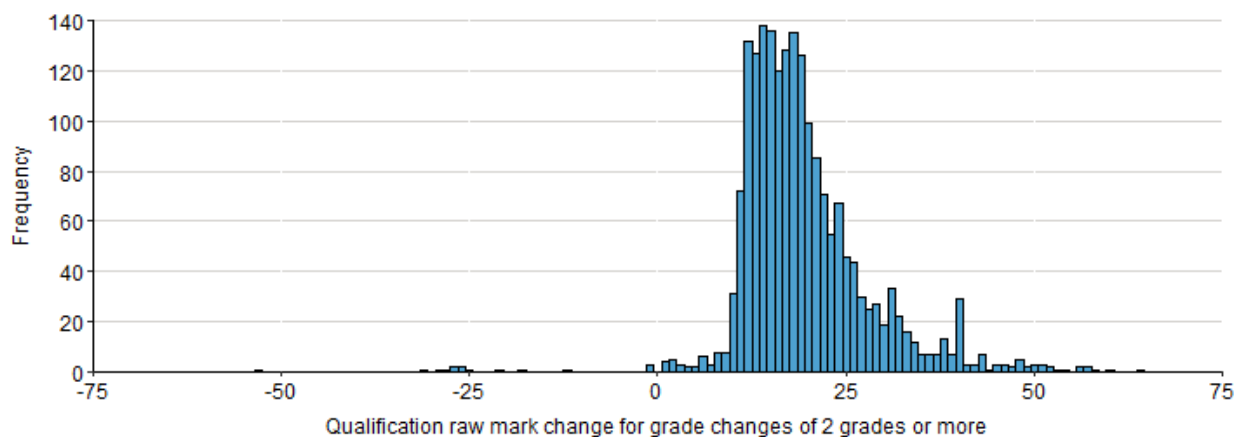


Figure 1. Qualification raw mark changes for grade changes of 2 grades or more

Unit mark changes associated with a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more *Figure 2* shows the raw mark change at unit level for units associated with a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more. The mean absolute unit raw mark change was 11.26 marks. While there are some large changes in marks, there are also many relatively small mark changes. Indeed, for 634 of the 3,382¹⁶ units associated with a qualification grade change of 2 grades or more (19%), the mark change is 3 raw marks or less, with 312 (9%) units receiving no mark change to a raw unit mark at review.

Figure 2. Unit raw mark changes for grade changes of 2 grades or more

¹⁵ These analyses include 5 cases where the raw mark did not change but the qualification grade did. Where reasons were provided for these changes it was apparent that most of these were due to issues that were rectified at the qualification level (UMS marks) but not the unit (raw mark) level, eg missing scripts.

¹⁶ For one unit review the unit mark is to be determined. However, the overall qualification grade was changed due to mark changes on a different unit.

Original qualification grade

Table 9 to 12 (see appendix A) show the original qualification grade for grade changes of 2 grades or more for A level, AS level, GCSE (full course) and GCSE (short course), respectively. For GCSE (full course) two tables are provided for legacy qualifications (graded A* to G) and reformed qualifications (graded 9 to 1).

It is apparent that the patterns are quite different at each qualification level. For A level, grade changes of 2 grades or more were most frequently associated with an original qualification grade B (45%). In many ways, A* in the legacy A level qualifications is a special case since the A* rules¹⁷ mean that it is possible for a relatively small mark change to move from a grade B directly to an A*.

At AS, qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more were most frequently associated with original qualification grades C and D¹⁸ (26% and 30%, respectively). At GCSE, grade changes of 2 grades or more were predominantly associated with an original qualification grade B for the legacy qualifications (full course: 30%; short course: 66%), and grade 6 for the reformed qualifications (29%)¹⁹.

Explanations provided by exam boards

Exam boards were asked to provide the reasons for grade changes of 2 grades or more. In the past, exam boards have not routinely collected or stored information about grade changes of 2 grades or more. Exam boards are now required to record reasons for their reviews of marking decisions and provide these to centres if requested. New requirements are being introduced meaning that exam boards will automatically have to provide reasons for all post-results review decisions from the summer 2020 exam series onwards²⁰. Some exam boards are already beginning to provide these.

¹⁷ To achieve an A* in the legacy A level qualifications students must a) achieve a grade A overall (equivalent to 320 UMS on a 4 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 4 unit A level). In the reformed A level qualifications (first awarded in some subjects in 2017) there is no UMS so exam boards will use predictions to identify an overall subject-level grade boundary for A* and students who achieve that mark or higher will get an A* (see <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2017/03/31/setting-a-in-the-new-a-levels/>).

¹⁸ At AS level there is not a grade A*. This means that upwards grade changes of 2 grades or more cannot be associated with a grade B.

¹⁹ There was one A level double award qualification that increased 2 grades from AB to A*A, and four GCSE double award qualifications that increased by 2 grades: one from CC to BB, and three from CD to BC. Due to the low numbers, tables are not provided for the double awards.

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-regulations-for-enquiries-and-appeals>

For 95% of the unit reviews related to qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more, exam boards have provided reasons for the mark change where necessary. It is worth considering that these reasons were provided at the unit (ie review) 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. Finally, there are some cases where in addition to the post-results review, special consideration was applied to the outcomes, meaning that the mark change can be due to a combination of the two.

Out of the 3,382 unit reviews, there was no raw mark change for 312 units (ie this unit did not contribute to the qualification grade change or grade changes were made outside of the review process), and the reason was not specified for 151 units where the mark did change. We will follow up with the boards where reasons for grade changes of 2 or more are not specified. The reasons provided for the mark change in the 2,919 remaining unit reviews have been classified into 5 broad categories:

- clerical/administrative error – for example, work that was not seen by the original marker/moderator, missing pages, keying error;
- marking error that has been corrected at review of marking – for example, misapplication of the mark scheme;
- marking error that has been corrected at review of marking and a clerical error – misapplication of the mark scheme in addition to a clerical/administrative error²¹;
- moderation error that has been corrected at review of moderation; this encompasses correcting moderator error by reverting to the original centre's marks or applying an alternative adjustment to the centre's marks;
- other – where marks have been changed outside of the review process, the reason for a mark change was not clear, or the script was missing.

The most common explanations for a mark change (where reasons were provided) were related to marking errors corrected at review of marking (79%; Table 8). The majority of these explanations refer to the misapplication of levels-based mark schemes. This is perhaps not surprising given that English was the subject most frequently associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more. English subjects tend

²¹ It is possible for a clerical error to be made on one part of the assessment, and a marking error to be made on another part of the same assessment. These errors may or may not be made by the same examiner, dependent on whether the script is marked in whole by one examiner, or on an item level, for which a number of examiners contribute towards the marking of one script.

to contain extended response items that are key to the validity of the assessment, yet are more challenging to mark.

Errors in moderation that were corrected at review of moderation accounted for 17% of qualification grade changes of 2 grades or more. Where a clerical or administrative error occurred (2%), the reasons included errors inputting marks, administrative errors resulting in scripts not being fully marked, and responses being indicated as 'no response'.

Table 8. Reasons for mark changes by review (categorisation based on the explanation provided by the exam board).

Reason	Number of reviews	% of reviews
Clerical/admin error	56	2
Marking error corrected at review of marking	2,307	79
Marking error corrected at review of marking and clerical/admin error	36	1
Moderation error corrected at review of moderation	497	17
Other	23	1
Total	2,919	100

Appendices

Appendix A: Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more by qualification type.

Table 9. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more – A level

Original qualification grade	Grade change						Total
	Two down	Two up	Three up	Four up	Five up	Six up	
A*	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
A	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
B	0	75	-	-	-	-	75
C	0	30	5	-	-	-	35
D	0	18	2	0	-	-	20
E	0	21	1	0	0	-	22
U	-	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	0	145	8	0	0	0	153

Table 10. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more - AS

Original qualification grade	Grade change						Total
	Two down	Two up	Three up	Four up	Five up	Six up	
A	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
B	0	0	-	-	-	-	0
C	0	22	0	-	-	-	22
D	0	25	0	0	-	-	25
E	0	19	0	0	0	-	19
U	-	17	0	0	0	0	17
Total	1	83	0	0	0	0	84

Table 11. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more – legacy GCSE (full course), on the A* to G scale.

Original qualification grade	Grade change						Total
	Two down	Two up	Three up	Four up	Five up	Six up	
A*	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
A	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
B	0	55	-	-	-	-	55
C	0	32	1	-	-	-	33
D	1	27	0	1	-	-	29
E	0	36	3	0	0	0	39
F	0	14	4	0	1	0	19
G	-	5	4	0	0	0	10
U	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1	169	12	1	1	1	185

Table 12. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more legacy GCSE (short course), on the A* to G scale.

Original qualification grade	Grade change						Total
	Two down	Two up	Three up	Four up	Five up	Six up	
A*	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
A	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
B	0	14	-	-	-	-	14
C	0	0	1	-	-	-	1
D	0	4	1	0	-	-	5
E	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
F	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
G	-	1	0	0	0	0	1
U	-	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	0	23	2	0	0	0	25

Table 13. Original qualification grade associated with grade changes of 2 grades or more reformed GCSE (full course), on the 9 to 1 scale.

Original qualification grade	Grade change						Total
	Two down	Two up	Three up	Four up	Five up	Six up	
9	0	-	-	-	-	-	0
8	2	-	-	-	-	-	2
7	6	176	-	-	-	-	182
6	1	416	26	-	-	-	443
5	1	240	19	2	-	-	262
4	1	269	7	2	0	-	279
3	0	311	11	0	1	0	323
2	0	12	5	2	0	0	19
1	-	6	0	1	0	0	7
Total	11	1,430	68	7	1	0	1,517

We have previously taken a view that a change of two or more grades represents a marking error. However, this is less clear cut this year, and it may be that some of the large mark changes are the result of a number of small mark changes on a number of items or components which do not represent marking errors. We are following this up with exam boards.

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