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Official Statistics

Appeals for GCSE, AS, A level and Project qualifications: 2019/20 academic year

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This release presents the number of appeals made during the 2019/20 academic year in England for GCSE, AS and A level and Project qualifications. The exam series covered in this release are those that were affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) in June 2020 for GCSE qualifications, June 2020 for AS/A qualifications and November 2019, January 2020 and June 2020 for Project qualifications. It also gives information on the number of appeals made in November 2019 and January 2020 exam series.

Exams were cancelled in summer 2020 following the closure of schools and colleges to most students, as part of the response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. As a result, a new process was introduced for awarding grades in summer 2020. Students alternatively received the **higher of a centre-assessed grade or a moderated grade** for GCSE, AS and A levels. Following consultation, we established the process on which a student could request a review of their grades in summer 2020. This included an **expanded grounds for appeals** in summer 2020, including where the student had did not apply for protective property and fairness or where the rules used by the exam board did not apply the protective property and fairness. Examples of the rules of thumb that the exam board could have applied are:

1. The head of centre had evidence that the school or college made a mistake when submitting the centre assessed grades to the exam board.
2. The head of centre had evidence that the exam board introduced an error into the moderated grades when they received the centre assessed grades from the centre.
3. The exam board used the wrong data when statistically moderating some students' results.

Students could not appeal because they disagreed with their school or college's professional judgement of the grade the student would have achieved in a school if exams had taken place. However, if a student thought their grade might have been affected by unfair treatment or by a mistake made by their school or college (bias or stereotypes/unconscious), including if they had evidence that a teacher had not treated the student could see the assessing organisation to investigate. These reviews were not called appeals, but could result in a change to the student's centre assessed grade. Guidance on the kinds of evidence that would have been considered for a review is available in our student guide to appeals, malpractice & maladministration complaints, summer 2020.

For summer 2020 results, the standard exam results services, including reviews of results and appeals, ended. Instead there was a different appeals process, consisting of two stages:

1. An initial review, in which a suitable member of an exam board's staff checked the relevant data, procedure or process depending on the reason for appeal.
2. An independent review. If a centre was not satisfied with the outcome of the initial review, they could request an independent review from a different exam board or awarding organisation. The independent review was carried out by an independent reviewer who was a senior member of staff who had not been involved in the initial review, or an external expert or moderator working for the awarding body and was not connected to the awarding body in any other way.

Due to the exceptional nature of the appeals process in summer 2020, direct comparisons between years are not valid and need to be treated with caution. Results could be higher than in previous years as students were awarded grades based on the higher of the **centre assessed grade (CAG) or the moderated grade**. Centres could also have appealed figures, when the majority of appeals have been completed.

1. Details

The main findings describing the number of appeals made for GCSE, AS/A (inc) and A level qualifications in the June 2019 to June 2020 academic year in England were:

1. Once appeals may cover several grades and the number of appeals for GCSEs and GCEs (AS and A level) in 2019/20 were 3,605. Of these appeals 2,995 (83% of appeals) were for GCSE qualifications.
2. Overall, 27,940 (0.49% of the 5 million grades certified for GCSEs and AS/A (AS and A level) were challenged.
3. Of the 2,995 appeals and GCSE grades challenged, 4,890 (19% of grades challenged) were changed.
4. Centre error was the most common reason for GCSE and GCE appeals.
5. For Project qualifications in 2019/20 there were 5 appeals received and 20 grades challenged.

2. Qualification and exam series breakdown

2.1 GCSE, GCE and Project qualifications

The number of appeals received by exam series for GCSEs, GCEs and Project qualifications

Table 1 Number of appeals received by exam series for GCSEs, GCEs and Project qualifications

Exam series	GCSE	GCE	Project
November 2019	40	31	0
January 2020	0	0	0
June 2020	2,955	3,574	5

3. Total number of appeals received, upheld and leading to a grade change

Usually, an appeal may be submitted by a centre if they are dissatisfied with the result of an assessment, but only if the centre believes that the result is the result of an inadequate adjustment or special consideration request, or a malpractice decision. The appeal may be upheld at either a preliminary appeal or an appeal hearing, and this may result in a change to the student's grade, or it may not result in a change.

In summer 2020, an appeal could have been submitted by a centre on the grounds that the exam board did not apply its procedures properly and fairly or where the rules used by the exam board to calculate results contained an error.

For summer 2020 the standard exam results services were not available and there was a different appeals process, consisting of two stages. Centres could request a review (called an initial review or an independent review, and this may have led to a change in one or more of the qualification grades involved.

In all exam series, an appeal can represent one candidate, or several, if related to the same potential issue. Furthermore, if an appeal which progressed to an independent review or hearing was upheld, it could result in a change to more than one grade in preliminary appeals, the process is unlikely a response to an appeal.

Due to the exceptional nature of the appeals process in summer 2020, direct comparisons between years in 2019/20 and previous years are not valid and need to be treated with caution.

The data and details contain figures on all grounds of appeals according to all exam boards.

3.1 GCSE

The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to grades changed has increased sharply for GCSE in 2019/20 reflecting the different nature of the appeal arrangements in summer 2020.

The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to grades changed for GCSE from 2016/17 to 2019/20

The percentage of appeals upheld has increased for GCSE in 2019/20 reflecting the different nature of the appeal arrangements in summer 2020.

The percentage of appeals upheld for GCSE from 2016/17 to 2019/20

Table 2: The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to a grade change at GCSE in 2019/20

Year	Appeals received	Appeals upheld	% of appeals upheld	Appeals leading to a change	% of grades changed	% of grades changed leading to an grade change
2016/17	1,195	1,195	100%	1,195	100%	0.02%
2017/18	450	450	100%	150	33%	0.01%
2018/19	770	418	54%	275	36%	0.01%
2019/20	2,955	1,995	67%	4,890	165%	0.09%

Note: Data for November series was not collected for GCSEs in 2018/17

The number of GCSE appeals increased from 770 in 2018/19 to 2,955 in 2019/20. The number of appeals upheld increased from 418 in 2018/19 to 1,995 in 2019/20 and the number of appeals leading to a change in grade increased from 275 in 2018/19 to 4,890 in 2019/20. The percentage of appeals upheld in 2019/20 has increased (67%) compared with 54% in 2018/19.

The changes between 2018/19 and 2019/20 reflect the difference in the appeals process in summer 2020. Direct comparisons between years are not valid and need to be treated with caution

3.2 GCE

The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to grades changed has increased sharply for GCE in 2019/20 reflecting the different nature of the appeal arrangements in summer 2020.

The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to grades changed for GCEs from 2016/17 to 2019/20

The percentage of appeals upheld has increased for GCE in 2019/20 reflecting the different nature of the appeal arrangements in summer 2020.

The percentage of appeals upheld for GCE from 2016/17 to 2019/20

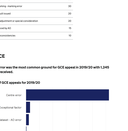


Table 3: The number of appeals received, appeals upheld and appeals leading to a grade change at GCE in 2019/20

Year	Appeals received	Appeals upheld	% of appeals upheld	Appeals leading to a change	% of grades changed	% of grades changed leading to an grade change
2016/17	720	720	100%	720	100%	0.02%
2017/18	270	145	54%	55	20%	0.01%
2018/19	448	243	54%	140	31%	0.01%
2019/20	3,574	1,995	56%	4,890	137%	0.09%

The number of GCE appeals increased from 448 in 2018/19 to 3,574 in 2019/20. The number of appeals upheld increased from 243 in 2018/19 to 1,995 in 2019/20 and the number of appeals upheld which led to a grade change has increased from 140 in 2018/19 to 4,890 in 2019/20. The percentage of appeals upheld in 2019/20 has increased (56%) compared with 54% in 2018/19.

The changes between 2018/19 and 2019/20 reflect the difference in the appeals process in summer 2020. Direct comparisons between years are not valid and need to be treated with caution

4. Nature of appeals in November 2019 and January 2020

A number 2019 of appeals could be made for a range of reasons:

1. Procedural inconsistencies - where the exam board did not apply procedures concerning or procedures were not followed properly and fairly.
2. Incorrect result issues - where a result generated by applying the process set out in the specification was incorrectly issued by the exam board in error (subject of one or more appeals).
3. Centre error - the centre provided the exam board with incorrect data.
4. Exceptional factor - the centre provided the exam board with incorrect data set.
5. Error introduced by AO - the exam board introduced errors into a specified data set.
6. Exceptional factor - in exceptional circumstances, the centre established an error in the data submitted to the exam board and requested that the exam board for statistical moderation was the most likely to lead to incorrect results.

None of these grounds for appeals existed in previous years or exam series.

Prior to summer 2020, an appeal could be made for a range of reasons. For instance, to contest the result of a review of marking or a review of moderation, or to contest a malpractice decision or a decision on reasonable adjustments or special consideration.

4.1 GCSE

Centre error was the most common ground for GCSE appeals in 2019/20 with 2,085 appeals received.

Nature of GCSE appeals for 2019/20

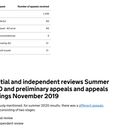


Table 4: Nature of GCSE appeals

Nature of appeal	Number of appeals received
Centre error	2,085
Exceptional factor	70
Incorrect dataset - AO error	70
Review of marking - marking error	70
Incorrect result issued	20
Reasonable adjustment or special consideration	15
Error introduced by AO	15
Procedural inconsistencies	10

4.2 GCE

Centre error was the most common ground for GCE appeals in 2019/20 with 1,245 appeals received.

Nature of GCE appeals for 2019/20

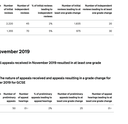


Table 5: Nature of GCE appeals

Nature of appeal	Number of appeals received
Centre error	1,245
Exceptional factor	910
Incorrect dataset - AO error	462
Procedural inconsistencies	5
Error introduced by AO	5
Incorrect result issued	5

5. Initial and independent reviews Summer 2020 and preliminary appeals and appeals hearings November 2019

As previously mentioned, for summer 2020 results, there was a different appeals process, consisting of two stages:

1. An initial review
2. An independent review

The differs from how appeals are normally represented in the standard exam results services, including reviews of results.

1. A preliminary appeal which is a review by a senior expert board member who has not been previously involved in the individual case. As a result of a preliminary appeal, the grade may be changed.
2. An appeal hearing which is where the appeal panel and exam board present their cases to the panel. Appeal hearings occur if the applicant is dissatisfied with the result of a preliminary appeal, they may decide to progress to an appeal hearing (stage 2 appeal).

An appeal panel consists of 3 or more members, at least one of which is independent (i.e. has not been an employee, supervisor, committee or board member of the exam board in the previous 5 years).

Due to the difference of the summer 2020 appeals process, comparisons with previous years are not possible. As such, data from November 2019 and January 2020 are presented in different tables.

5.1 Summer 2020

80% of all appeals received in summer 2020 resulted in at least one grade change.

Table 6: The volume of appeals received and appeals resulting in a grade change for summer 2020 for GCSE and GCE

Qualification	Number of appeals received	Number of appeals upheld	% of total number of appeals upheld	Number of appeals leading to a change	Number of appeals leading to a change as % of appeals upheld	Number of appeals leading to a change as % of appeals received
GCSE	2,220	45	2%	45	100%	2%
GCE	1,245	15	1%	875	87%	70

5.2 November 2019

44% of all appeals received in November 2019 resulted in at least one grade change.

Table 7: The volume of appeals received and appeals resulting in a grade change for November 2019 for GCSE

Qualification	Number of appeals received	Number of appeals upheld	% of total number of appeals upheld	Number of appeals leading to a change	Number of appeals leading to a change as % of appeals upheld	Number of appeals leading to a change as % of appeals received
GCSE	40	20	50%	20	100%	50%

The number of grades challenged in 2019/20 for GCSE and GCE

A single appeal may represent one or more qualification grades which are being challenged. For instance, a student may request a review of their results which relate to a number of its students. An upheld appeal may result in a change to all, some, or none of the qualification grades which are being challenged. The number of grades which are challenged may not be relevant to the number of grades challenged or changed.

Additionally, a candidate may be included in more than one appeal. In 2019/20, there were 27,940 GCSE and AS/A2 candidates whose grades were involved in an appeal. There were 4,890 (20.08%) of the approximately 27 million grades certified for these qualifications in 2019/20 that were changed as part of an upheld appeal.

The number of grades changed or unchanged does not include cases where either the centre assessed grade or the moderated grade was higher than the other. There were 24,250 GCSE grades and 3,690 grades which were unchanged in the appeal process in summer 2020.

There were 24,250 grades challenged and 3,470 grades changed for GCSE and 3,550 grades challenged and 1,420 grades changed for GCE in 2019/20.

The number of grades challenged and changed in 2019/20 for GCSE and GCE

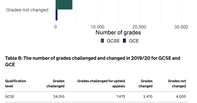


Table 8: The number of grades challenged and changed in 2019/20 for GCSE and GCE

Qualification level	Grades challenged	Grades challenged for upheld appeals	Grades changed	Grades not changed
GCSE	24,050	20,575	3,470	4,030
GCE	3,550	1,900	1,420	480

7. Completion within exam boards' target timescales

The target timescales in 2019/20 differed according to exam series. In Summer 2020 there were:

1. 6 weeks to complete an initial review from receipt of the application
2. 6 weeks to complete an independent review from the receipt of a request for an independent review

In November 2019 there were:

1. 6 weeks to complete a preliminary appeal from receipt of the application
2. 10 weeks to complete an appeal hearing from the receipt of a request for an appeal hearing.

For 2019/20, there are fewer than 5 GCE and no GCSE appeals which were still in progress at the date of data submission. These might or might not have been completed within the target timescale.

7.1 Summer 2020

Table 9: Completion of GCSE and GCE appeals within exam boards' target timescales in Summer 2020

Qualification level	Initial reviews received	Initial reviews completed in time	Independent reviews received	Independent reviews completed in time
GCSE	2,220	2,140	45	45
GCE	1,395	1,335	70	65

In Summer 2020, 97% of the 2,220 GCSE initial reviews and 98% of the 45 GCSE independent reviews were completed within the target time. Furthermore, 98% of the 1,395 GCE initial reviews and 93% of the 70 GCE independent reviews were completed within the target time.

The median number of days to complete a GCSE and GCE initial review was 14 and 12 days respectively. The median number of days to complete a GCSE and GCE independent review was 28 and 25 days respectively.

Overall, 97% of all GCSE Summer 2020 appeals and 98% of all GCE Summer 2020 appeals were completed within the target time.

7.2 November 2019

Table 10: Completion of GCSE appeals within exam boards' target timescales in November 2019

Qualification level	Preliminary appeals received	Preliminary appeals completed in time	Appeal hearings received	Appeal hearings completed in time
GCSE	50	50	0–	0

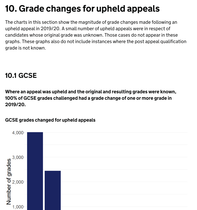
In November 2019, 100% of the 50 GCSE preliminary appeals and 0% of the fewer than 5 GCSE appeal hearings were completed within the target time. The median number of days to complete a GCSE and GCE initial review preliminary appeal was 10 days and the median number of days to complete a GCSE appeal hearing was 77 days.

Overall, 98% of all GCSE November 2019 appeals were completed within the target time.

8. Grades challenged at appeal

Grade 3 was the most contested grade for GCSE 9 to 1, grade 4-4 the most contested grades for GCSE combined science and grade B the most contested grade for GCE.

Grades challenged at appeal in 2019/20 for GCSE 9 to 1, GCSE: combined science and GCE



Source: Table 7: Data tables for appeals for GCSE, AS, A level and Projects: 2019 to 2020 academic year

9. Raw mark changes for upheld appeals

There were no marks awarded in summer 2020 and therefore appeals following the Summer 2020 exam series did not result in any mark changes.

In the GCSE November 2019 series, there were 30 grades which marks changed following an appeal and the majority of mark changes were of 2 or 3 marks respectively.

For a full breakdown please see our published data tables Table 8: Data tables for appeals for GCSE, AS, A level and Projects: 2019 to 2020 academic year

10. Grade changes for upheld appeals

The charts in this section show the magnitude of grade changes made following an upheld appeal in 2019/20. A small number of upheld appeals were in respect of candidates whose original grade was unknown. Those cases do not appear in these graphs. These graphs also do not include instances where the post appeal qualification grade is not known.

10.1 GCSE

Where an appeal was upheld and the original and resulting grades were known, 100% of GCSE grades challenged had a grade change of one or more grade in 2019/20.

GCSE grades changed for upheld appeals

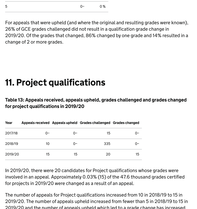


Table 11: GCSE grades changed for upheld appeals

Magnitude of change in grade	Number of grades	% of grades
0	4,005	54 %
1	2,440	33 %
2	610	8 %
3	220	3 %
4	65	1 %
5	25	0 %
6	15	0 %
7	0–	0 %
8	0–	0 %

For appeals that were upheld (and where the original and resulting grades were known), 54% of GCSE grades challenged did not result in a qualification grade change in 2019/20. Of the grades that changed, 72% changed by one grade and 28% resulted in a change of 2 or more grades.

10.2 GCE

Where an appeal was upheld and the original and resulting grades were known, 100% of GCE grades challenged had a grade change of one or more grade in 2019/20.

GCE grades changed for upheld appeals

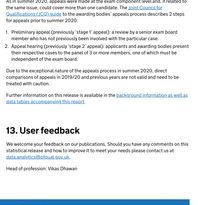


Table 12: GCE grades changed for upheld appeals

Magnitude of change in grade	Number of grades	% of grades
0	480	26 %
1	1,210	64 %
2	160	8 %
3	30	1 %
4	10	0 %
5	0–	0 %

For appeals that were upheld (and where the original and resulting grades were known), 26% of GCE grades challenged did not result in a qualification grade change in 2019/20. Of the grades that changed, 86% changed by one grade and 14% resulted in a change of 2 or more grades.

11. Project qualifications

Table 13: Appeals received, appeals upheld, grades challenged and grades changed for project qualifications in 2019/20

Year	Appeals received	Appeals upheld	Grades challenged	Grades changed
2017/18	0–	0–	15	0–
2018/19	10	0–	335	0–
2019/20	15	15	20	15

In 2019/20, there were 20 candidates for Project qualifications whose grades were involved in an appeal. Approximately 0.33% (15) of the 47.6 thousand grades certified for projects in 2019/20 were changed as a result of an appeal.

The number of appeals for Project qualifications increased from 10 in 2018/19 to 15 in 2019/20. The number of appeals upheld increased from fewer than 5 in 2018/19 to 15 in 2019/20 and the number of appeals upheld which led to a grade change has increased from fewer than 5 in 2018/19 to 15 in 2019/20. The percentage of appeals upheld in 2019/20 has increased (87%) compared with 0% in 2018/19. The changes between 2018/19 and 2019/20 reflect the difference in the appeals process in summer 2020. Direct comparisons between years are not valid and need to be treated with caution.

12. Contextual information

This report presents data on requests for appeals made to exam boards for the academic year 2019/20. The qualifications covered in this report are GCSEs, GCEs (AS and A level) and Project qualifications in England.

In Summer 2020, appeals could be submitted by a school or college if they believed that an exam board did not apply its procedures properly and fairly or where the data used by the exam board to calculate results contained an error. Appeals were made at the subject level and, if related to the same issue, may cover more than one candidate. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) guide to the awarding bodies' appeals process describes 2 steps for appeals in summer 2020:

1. An initial review, in which a suitable member of an exam board's staff checked the relevant nature, procedure or process depending on the nature of appeal.
2. An independent review. If a centre was not satisfied with the outcome of the initial review, they had 14 calendar days from the outcome to request an independent review. The independent review was carried out by an independent decision maker (i.e. someone who has not been directly employed by the awarding body, was not be an examiner or moderator working for the awarding body and was not connected to the awarding body in any other way).

However, prior to summer 2020, appeals could be submitted if a school or college was dissatisfied with the result of a review of marking, review of moderation, a malpractice decision, or the outcome of a reasonable adjustment or special consideration request. As in summer 2020, appeals were made at the exam component level and, if related to the same issue, could cover more than one candidate. The Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) guide to the awarding bodies' appeals process describes 2 steps for appeals prior to summer 2020:

1. Preliminary appeal (previously 'stage 1 appeal): a review by a senior exam board member who has not previously been involved with the particular case.
2. Appeal hearing (previously 'stage 2' appeal): applicants and awarding bodies present their cases to a panel of 3 or more members, one of which must be independent of the exam board.

Due to the exceptional nature of the appeals process in summer 2020, direct comparisons of appeals in 2019/20 and previous years are not valid and need to be treated with caution.

Further information on this release is available in the background information as well as data tables accompanying this report.

13. User 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 data.analytics@ofqual.gov.uk.

Head of profession: Vikas Dhawan

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