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Official Statistics

# Background information for appeals for GCSE, AS, A level and Project qualifications: 2020 to 2021 academic year

Published 21 April 2022

**Applies to England**

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## Purpose

In this release, Ofqual presents data on all appeals reported for all GCSE, AS, A level, and Project qualifications during the 2020 to 2021 academic year. The report covers all the opportunities to enter for the qualifications during the academic year:

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autumn 2020, November 2020 and June 2021 for GCSE qualifications, autumn 2020 and June 2021 for AS and A level qualifications and autumn 2020, November 2020, January 2021 and June 2021 for Project qualifications.

The term ‘appeals’ here refers to:

- all centre reviews and appeals to awarding organisations requested during summer 2021
- all preliminary appeals and appeal hearings requested in autumn 2020, November 2020 and January 2021

Please note that, due to the exceptional nature of the appeals process in summer 2021, as well as the additional autumn 2020 series, direct comparisons of appeals in 2020 to 2021 and previous years are not valid and should not be made.

## Geographical coverage

The accompanying report presents data on the number of appeals in England. Four awarding organisations offer GCSE, AS, A level and Project qualifications in England:

- AQA Education (AQA)
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
- Pearson Education Ltd (Pearson)
- WJEC-CBAC Ltd (WJEC/Eduqas)

While ASDAN and City and Guilds also offer Project qualifications, no student appeals were reported for their qualifications in the academic year 2020 to 2021.

## Appeals in summer 2021

On 4 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that [exams in summer 2021 could not go ahead as planned](#), because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. On 13 January 2021, the Secretary of State asked Ofqual to [jointly consult with the Department for Education on alternative arrangements to award grades](#). The [consultation](#) with the Department for Education ran between 15 and 29 January 2021 and received over 100,000 responses. The [Secretary of State then issued a direction to Ofqual](#), setting out government policy that students taking GCSE, AS, A levels and Project qualifications in England, should be [awarded grades based on teacher assessment](#).

As part of Ofqual’s [General Qualifications Alternative Awarding Framework](#), every student had the right to appeal their grade if they so wished in summer 2021.

Before a grade was submitted, teachers should have made students aware of the evidence they were using to assess them on which their grade was based. Students would have had the opportunity to identify any errors and make their teachers aware of any mitigating circumstances they believe should have been taken into account. In summer 2021 an appeal could be [made on grounds of procedural errors, administrative errors, or on grounds that the selection of evidence or the grade determined based on the evidence reflected an unreasonable academic judgement](#).

A procedural error might have been identified by a centre following a student’s request for a centre review or by the awarding organisation where the student’s grounds of appeal raised procedural issues. A centre might have identified as part of

a centre review that it made an administrative error in connection with a teacher assessed grade.

If the student still believed there to be an error that their centre had not found, they would ask their centre to submit an appeal to the awarding organisation for them. The appeal could be made on the basis that there was a procedural error, an administrative error or a grade reflected an unreasonable exercise of academic judgement by the centre. An appeal on unreasonable exercise of academic judgement could be made on the grounds that:

- the centre's judgement of the evidence which should be used to determine a teacher assessed grade was unreasonable
- the centre's judgement of the teacher assessed grade indicated by the evidence it selected was unreasonable

Appeals on the grounds of academic judgement were only considered by awarding organisations and not by centres.

Awarding organisations aimed to complete appeals as soon as possible and particular efforts were made for those appeals that had been identified as priority appeals for students applying to higher education who did not attain their firm choice (meaning, the offer they accepted as their first choice) and wished to appeal an A level or other Level 3 qualification result.

The awarding organisations aimed to complete the awarding organisation appeals stage within 42 calendar days of receipt of the application. Due to the nature of appeals in summer 2021, awarding organisations may have required additional input from centres, and it was not always possible for them to meet this target.

The timescales for centre reviews were suggested to enable centres to submit appeals to the awarding organisation within the deadlines set out in section 9 in the [Joint Council for Qualifications guidance](#). Centres may have set their own deadlines for centre reviews. Priority appeals that were not submitted to the awarding organisation by 23 August 2021 were still treated as a priority and awarding organisations endeavoured to process them as promptly as possible. There was, however, a risk they were not completed in time for those with a higher education place dependent on the outcome of the appeal.

As there were no strict timescales in place for centres to complete a centre review in summer 2021, unlike in previous publications, this release does not present figures on the number or proportion of appeals completed within the target timeframe.

As stated under 'Purpose' in this document, due to the exceptional nature of the appeals process in summer 2021, direct comparisons of appeals in 2020 to 2021 and previous years are not valid and should not be made.

## Appeals in exam series other than summer 2021

In autumn 2020, November 2020 and January 2021 if a school or college was not satisfied with the result of a review of marking, review of moderation, a malpractice decision, or a judgement on reasonable adjustment or special considerations, and/or if they believed the awarding organisation had made a procedural error, it could make an appeal to the awarding organisation. The GCSE and GCE Qualification Level Conditions and Requirements ([the Conditions](#)) covering GCSE A\* to G and 9 to 1 and [Conditions covering A level and AS legacy](#) and [reformed](#) qualifications also require awarding organisations to accept appeals requests directly from private candidates. An appeal could be in relation to the outcomes of one or more

candidates, if they were all thought to have been affected by the same issue.

Schools and colleges could submit appeals regarding an awarding organisation's decisions about malpractice if they believed the awarding organisation did not follow its procedures, the decision was unreasonable given existing evidence, the sanction was disproportionate or if new evidence came to light. Schools and colleges could also submit appeals related to reasonable adjustments and special consideration if they believed the awarding organisation did not follow its procedures.

The awarding organisations operate a 2-stage appeals process:

1. A preliminary appeal (formerly referred to as a 'stage 1' appeal) is a review of the case by a senior member of the awarding organisation who has not been involved previously with the particular case.
2. An appeal hearing (formerly referred to as a 'stage 2' appeal) involves applicants and awarding organisations presenting their case to a panel, which the awarding organisation convenes. The panel comprises at least 3 members, one of whom must be independent (that means someone who is not, and has not at any time during the previous 5 years, been a member of the board or its committees, or an employee or examiner at the awarding organisation). A school or college can request an appeal hearing only after going through a preliminary appeal. Although Ofqual's Conditions do not require it, in 2017, awarding organisations committed to completing a preliminary appeal in 5 calendar weeks and an appeal hearing in 10 calendar weeks from the receipt of the request for an appeal hearing (previously the target was 50 days for either process). This was extended in 2019 so the target timescale for a preliminary appeal was 6 calendar weeks and an appeal hearing remained 10 calendar weeks. As with the appeal arrangements for summer 2020, in some cases appeals are not resolved in the target timescale. Sometimes, this occurs to allow a fair appeal hearing with appropriate evidence, or for individuals to be present from both the school or college and the awarding organisation.

## The Examination Procedures Review Service

If a student in summer 2021 or a school or college in autumn 2020, November 2020 or January 2021, was still dissatisfied with the outcome following an appeal, they could apply to the [Examination Procedures Review Service \(EPRS\)](#) within 21 days of receiving the appeal outcome from the awarding organisation. The EPRS is provided by Ofqual.

Ofqual reviews each application and arranges a review hearing if appropriate. Ofqual looks at whether the awarding organisation has followed the appropriate procedures and used them properly and fairly.

If the awarding organisation has not followed its own procedures or has not secured the outcomes required by Ofqual's regulations, the application to EPRS may be upheld. Awarding organisations must give due regard to the outcome of EPRS hearings, both in respect of results issued to the candidate making the application and, where appropriate, other potentially affected results.

## Data source

AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC/Eduqas provide data on appeals requested for all GCSE, AS and A level assessments taken during the summer series in England on

an annual basis. Data on Project qualifications was only collected from 2017 to 2018 onwards.

## Limitations

Ofqual cannot guarantee that the data sent are correct, although it expects awarding organisations to send correct data. Summary data is sent to awarding organisations for checking and confirmation. The figures reported for the summer series in this release reflect the status of appeals at the data cut-off date of the 21 February 2022. Appeals reported for the autumn and November series in this release reflect the status of appeals at the data cut-off date of the 18 June 2021 for AS and A level, and 27 July 2021 for GCSE.

## Revisions

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

## Confidentiality and rounding

The number of appeals and grade changes have been rounded to the nearest 5 to preserve confidentiality. The figures between 1 and 4 have been denoted as “Fewer than 5” and 0 represents zero value. Total values of rows or columns are calculated using unrounded figures, so the sum of rounded figures may differ from the total reported. All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

As a result of rounded figures, the percentages (calculated on actual figures) shown in any tables may not necessarily add up to 100.

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

## Status

These statistics are classified as Official Statistics.

## Related publications

Two other statistical releases and publications relate to this one:

- [Malpractice for GCSE and A level: summer 2021 exam series](#): this statistical release published by Ofqual provides an analysis of the malpractice cases and sanctions for GCSE, AS and A levels in summer 2021 exam series
- [Provisional appeals for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2021](#): this statistical release published by Ofqual provides an analysis on provisional appeals for GCSE, AS and A levels in summer 2021 exam series

## Useful links

- [Report and data tables](#) accompanying this release
- [Definitions](#) of important terms used in this release
- [Policies and procedures](#) that Ofqual follows for production of statistical releases

## Feedback

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