

Delivery of Summer 2014 General Qualifications



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1. Introduction

This is the first time we have reported in detail about the issues that we and the exam boards manage during and after the summer exam series. We believe it is important to be open and transparent about the work we do. Some of the issues in this report occur in each exam series; others are less common.

Many thousands of qualifications are taken each year by students in schools and colleges. This report focuses on GCSEs, A levels and similar qualifications used as alternatives to these: International GCSEs (IGCSEs), Pre-U and International Baccalaureate. These are provided by a small number of exam boards: AQA, CCEA, Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO), OCR, Pearson and WJEC.

Over the course of a summer series we oversee the exam boards' management of a variety of issues, from question papers going missing in the post to incorrect results being issued. In June and July each year exam boards mark over 22 million exam scripts and pieces of coursework, and over seven million results are issued in August. Exam boards are responsible for managing this operation, including dealing with any issues as they arise. Our role is to make sure that any action they take is fair and consistent.

There were a number of changes to qualifications taken in summer 2014, as well as other changes in the system. Some of these are detailed below.

GCSEs

In most cases, the content of the GCSEs was unchanged from summer 2013. The main change in summer 2014 was to the way in which the exams were taken. All GCSEs taken in England in summer 2014 were linear – that is, students had to take all their exams at the end of the course. In previous years, students could take some of their exams in November, January or March. The move to linear GCSEs led to increased volumes of exam scripts this summer – the number of students was in line with previous years but students took more exams at the same time.

Changes to performance tables meant that fewer Year 10¹ students were entered early for GCSEs this summer. In September 2013, the Secretary of State announced that only the first attempt at a qualification would count for school performance tables.² It is likely that this change was one of the reasons why, after increasing by

¹ Students in Year 10 are those who will be aged 15 by the end of the academic year

² www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-early-entry-at-gcse

nearly 40 per cent in summer 2013, entries from Year 10 students in summer 2014 were more in line with those in summer 2012. Those Year 10 students that did take GCSEs in summer 2014 were generally more able than Year 10 students in recent years, suggesting that schools had been more selective.

In summer 2014 there were changes to some subjects. In GCSE English and English language, the speaking and listening assessment was reported separately and did not contribute to the overall grade. GCSE geography syllabuses changed to cover more appropriately the whole curriculum.

GCSE results, alongside an open letter to schools, were published by the Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ) on 21st August 2014.³ At the same time we published a brief explanation of the results.⁴ Compared to previous years, results for Year 11⁵ students changed very little. We analysed the data from all exam boards and published information about school level variation in results. In general, the variation experienced by individual schools was similar to previous years. The exception was GCSE English and English language where there was more variation at school level, and this was more pronounced in schools that had previously used a modular approach with re-sits.⁶

International GCSEs

There were changes in summer 2014, as some of the qualifications known as International GCSEs (IGCSEs) no longer counted in school performance tables. Of those that do count, the largest entry subject, in England, is English language. From summer 2013, entries for this subject increased by 96 per cent to 139,000 in summer 2014.

AS and A levels

From 2014 onwards there was no longer a January exam series for students in England. As a result, students in England in summer 2014 were no longer able to take units in January. Therefore the number of AS and A2 exams taken in summer 2014 was higher, although the overall number of AS and A level qualifications taken was largely unchanged.

³ www.gov.uk/government/news/changes-to-early-entry-at-gcse

⁴ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/brief-explanation-summer-2014-gcse-results

⁵ Students in Year 11 are those who will be aged 16 by the end of the academic year

⁶ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/schoolcollege-level-variability-gcses-summer-2014/

AS and A level results, alongside an open letter to schools, were published by the JCQ on 14th August 2014.⁷ Again we published a brief explanation of the results⁸ and further information about school and college level variation in results.⁹ Overall AS and A level results were very stable, with only small changes in the proportions achieving each grade. There were some changes in subject choices, reflecting a trend towards the more traditional subjects.

Pre-U and International Baccalaureate

There were no changes to these qualifications in summer 2014. They are used by schools and colleges alongside AS and A levels and we monitor them closely, particularly during the summer exam series.

2. How we oversee the summer exam series

We monitor the operational delivery of the exams, to make sure exam boards can deliver timely and accurate results. For GCSE, AS and A level we also monitor closely the standard-setting process in order to make sure that the grade standards in a subject are comparable across exam boards.

Delivery

We use two main mechanisms to monitor exam boards' operational delivery of the exam series.

First, we hold regular meetings with exam boards throughout the year. We use the meetings to identify and manage common risks and issues, exchange information, and receive regular updates from exam boards on the exam series. Throughout the year we focus on different issues according to the annual cycle, including recruitment of examiners, scheduling of standardisation and awarding meetings, marking progress and enquiries about results.

Second, we monitor how exam boards handle significant incidents. We require exam boards to notify us of any event that has occurred, or is likely to occur, that could

⁷ www.jcq.org.uk/examination-results/a-levels

⁸ www.ofqual.gov.uk/news/brief-explanation-summer-2014-level-results/

⁹ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/variability-in-a-level-results-for-individual-schools-colleges/

have a negative impact on students, which we refer to as an 'Adverse Effect'.¹⁰ Many of the issues included in this report were reported to us as incidents that could have an Adverse Effect.

We maintain oversight of how the exam boards deal with the incidents they report to us. If we believe that an exam board is not handling an incident appropriately, and is in breach of its Conditions of Recognition, we can take regulatory action.

Other monitoring of exam boards

As well as keeping a close eye on the delivery and awarding of qualifications, we investigate issues that may affect all exam boards.

Areas that we have focused on recently include ways in which exam boards:

- handle security-breached question papers;
- deal with malpractice;
- prepare qualifications for accreditation;
- manage their risks;
- manage training events for teachers;
- inform schools and colleges about changes to GCSE English qualifications.

Monitoring awarding

We closely monitor GCSE and A level standard-setting. We do this because we expect very close comparability of grade standards between different exam boards and between different syllabuses in any one subject. Exam boards send us data from their GCSE and A level awards, detailing the outcomes (results) against statistical predictions of the proportions of students likely to achieve the key grades.¹¹ This activity takes place throughout July and early August.

¹⁰ Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition (www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/371266/2014-11-03-general-conditions-of-recognition-november.pdf) define an Adverse Effect as follows.

An act, omission, event, incident, or circumstance has an Adverse Effect if it –

- (a) gives rise to prejudice to Learners or potential Learners, or
- (b) adversely affects –
 - (i) the ability of the awarding organisation to undertake the development, delivery or award of qualifications in accordance with its Conditions of Recognition
 - (ii) the standards of qualifications which the awarding organisation makes available or proposes to make available, or public confidence in qualifications

¹¹ At GCSE, the key grades are A*, A, C and F. At A level, the key grades are A*, A and E

Our aims are to:

- maintain standards year-on-year;
- align standards across exam boards;
- secure public confidence in the results being issued.

We don't expect exam boards to exactly meet their predictions, but we do expect that their outcomes will be close to predictions, unless they can provide evidence that justifies different outcomes.

We set reporting tolerances to be used (based on the number of students entered for the particular qualification). For syllabuses with more than 3,000 students, exam boards must report any outcomes that are more than one percentage point away from the prediction. For smaller entry syllabuses, the reporting tolerances are wider.

Wherever actual and predicted outcomes differ beyond the reporting tolerance, exam boards must provide evidence to support their decisions. Our procedure for exam boards to create predictions and submit awarding data contains more information on the reporting tolerances as well as details on the predictions used for awarding in summer 2014.¹²

During July and early August 2014, we reviewed daily the data from the exam boards. We focused on any awards that were reported as out of tolerance and reviewed any additional evidence provided in support of out-of-tolerance awards. For each out-of-tolerance report we asked a set of questions.¹³ In some instances, we requested further evidence from exam boards and, where appropriate, we challenged exam boards if we did not accept their explanation. Ultimately, we can require them to move grade boundaries to bring awards within tolerance.

During this year's summer data exchange we reviewed the outcomes from 538 GCSE and A level awards, of which 52 (10 per cent) fell outside reporting tolerances at one or more grades.¹⁴ In 12 of those cases we asked exam boards for more evidence and in all cases we accepted the additional evidence provided. Across all

¹² www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/summer-2014-data-exchange-procedures-gce-gcse-level-12-certificates

¹³ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/reviewing-gce-gcse-outcome-data-received-exam-boards-part-data-exchange-procedures-summer-2014/

¹⁴ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/summer-2014-awards-out-of-tolerance-summary

awards, we were content that exam boards had maintained appropriate standards in GCSEs and A levels in summer 2014.

We reviewed overall outcomes with senior staff from exam boards in late July for A level and early August for GCSE. Exam boards then had a few days to finalise outcomes before data was processed for results days.

Since summer 2013, we have required exam boards to report outcome data from their awards for IGCSEs. Some of these qualifications, such as English language, have become increasingly popular so we now monitor the outcomes closely as part of our monitoring of summer awarding.

3. Summer 2014 delivery issues

OCR marking problems

In June 2014, OCR notified us of problems with a new version of their onscreen marking system. As a result, examiners were not able to complete their marking as planned, making marking much slower than expected. A number of examiners dropped out of marking completely. OCR worked to address the problems and moved many papers to a previous version of the software.

By mid-July OCR were behind schedule compared with the same point in 2013. Notwithstanding the problems with the onscreen marking software, the increased volume of scripts to be marked in 2014 meant that although OCR had completed more marking compared to the same point in summer 2013, they had marked a lower percentage of the overall total. On 18th July 2014 OCR reported having completed 83 per cent of all marking, compared with 89 per cent on the corresponding day in 2013.

OCR told us that they were particularly concerned about a number of units where the progress was much slower (and therefore where the proportion of marks received was much lower than 83 per cent) and that they were taking steps to increase marking capacity (for example, by training examiners from other units in the same subject).

For the following three weeks we kept a close eye on OCR's marking progress. OCR approached other exam boards to see if they could offer any potential examiners in some subjects, and they prioritised the marking for those students who were completing A levels and likely to be applying for a university place through UCAS.

By 1st August 2014, OCR had completed 97 per cent of their marking, whereas AQA, Pearson and WJEC had completed over 99 per cent of their marking. AQA, Pearson and WJEC had completed their A level marking but still had a few thousand GCSE scripts to mark.

OCR made considerable efforts to monitor examiner progress in late July and early August and over 99.9 per cent of A level marking was completed in time for results day.

OCR conducted an internal review to understand the causes of the problems and we have carried out a separate investigation. We will consider the risks to delivery in summer 2015 and whether or not there is a case for us to take formal regulatory action. We will publish more information when our investigation is complete.

Security breaches

GCSE, A level and other question papers are designed to be taken at a particular time. Schools and colleges must keep them secure until just before the scheduled time of the exam. If the content becomes known before this time, the security of the paper can be breached. Every year a small number of security breaches occur, either because papers sent to schools are lost or because schools open (and sometimes issue) a set of papers on the wrong day.

In summer 2014, 20 security breaches were reported to us. We monitor how exam boards handle them to see whether security breaches are contained or, if they cannot be contained, that the exam board and/or the school or college takes appropriate action. In cases where there is strong evidence of a widespread security breach we would expect an exam board to take robust action; this might include replacing the question paper and/or rescheduling the exam. If an exam board decides not to replace the question paper, we expect it to closely monitor social media for any evidence of a wider security breach, and also to analyse results to check for any anomalies. There is no evidence that any of the security breaches this summer had an impact on results.

Table 1: Security breaches reported by exam boards

	Security breaches			
	Total	Due to exam officer / invigilator error	Due to malpractice / maladmin	Due to other reason

AQA	8	3	2	3
CIE	4	3	1¹⁵	0
IBO	0	0	0	0
OCR	3	1	2	0
Pearson	0	0	0	0
WJEC	5	4	0	1
Total	20	11	5	4

Overall, the most common reason for security breaches was schools and colleges handing out the wrong question papers to students by mistake. This type of incident affected WJEC (4 cases), AQA (3), CIE (3) and OCR (1) this summer. In some instances the schools quickly identified that they had made a mistake and the correct question papers were handed out. In other cases, the mistake was not noticed until after the exam had finished.

These types of security breaches can pose particular practical challenges for exam boards. The paper that is handed out in error is usually for a different unit within the same subject and due to be taken at a later date. The security of that later paper has therefore been breached.

There is often little time before the security-breached paper is due to be sat, making it difficult for the exam board to replace the question paper, but more than enough time, potentially, for discussion of content between students. The growth of social media, including websites for students to discuss exam content, makes containing security breaches more challenging.

Schools handing out the wrong papers to students by mistake has the potential to cause more serious security breaches, although none were shown to have had a wider impact this summer. Exam boards typically require an action plan from schools that make these mistakes, setting out how they will prevent the same type of incident from recurring. To try to reduce incidences in future, the JCQ exam boards have recently amended their guidance and they now require two school/college staff to check papers before they are handed out to students. CIE plans to introduce similar additional checks in 2015.

Some cases of malpractice (deliberate actions) or maladministration (accidental actions) had the potential to cause wider security breaches this summer. AQA (2 cases), OCR (2 cases) and CIE (1 case) all reported such cases to us. Ultimately, there was no evidence that these incidents had a wider impact.

¹⁵ This security breach was at a school and college abroad and concerned a number of question papers with the same content as IGCSE papers taken in England. The security breach was not shown to have had any impact on English candidates.

Question Paper (QP) errors

Sometimes exam boards make mistakes in the writing of question papers and these are not identified before the exam takes place. Where this happens, exam boards are required to report errors to us, categorised according to their severity.

Categorisation of question paper errors

Category 1 – errors that make a question impossible to answer, either as a result of the way the question is constructed or set out, or as a result of a printing error which would mean parts of the paper are unavailable to students.

Category 2 – errors that may cause unintentional difficulties for students when answering the question.

Category 3 – minor issues such as grammatical mistakes and typos that do not affect a student's ability to answer the question.

Overall, 20 question paper errors were reported to us this summer. The number of errors is relatively low compared to the overall number of question papers produced by the exam boards. In some cases, errors occur in modified versions of the papers and we have included those errors in this report. We have not counted the modified question papers as part of the total number of papers because they are a variant on the 'standard' papers.

Most of the errors were reported by the GCSE and A level exam boards in England (AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC). We collected similar data from them in 2012 and 2013 and so we can compare the number of errors (see Table 2). We do not have previous years' data for IBO and CIE.

Table 2: Total reported question paper errors 2012 to 2014 (AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC)

	Question paper errors			
	Summer 2012	Summer 2013	Summer 2014	Total question papers in summer 2014
AQA	3	3	2	638
OCR	7	4	9	497
Pearson	10	6	4	270
WJEC	1	1	1	308
Total	21	14	16	1,713

Most question paper errors reported this summer were Category 2 errors¹⁶; these accounted for 15 out of the total of 20 errors. Two of the reported question paper errors were Category 1 errors. Table 3 provides further details by exam board.

¹⁶ Errors that may cause unintentional difficulties for students when answering the question

Table 3: Question paper errors reported to us – summer 2014, as of 1st October 2014

	Question paper errors			
	Total	Category 1	Category 2	Minor issues
AQA	2	0	2	0
CIE	0	0	0	0
IBO	4	2	2	0
OCR	9	1	7	1
Pearson	4	1	3	0
WJEC	1	0	1	0
Total	20	4	15	1

When a question paper is found to contain an error, exam boards review whether there is any evidence that students have been affected. They do this by manually reviewing students' answers and/or by analysing statistical data showing how the students performed on the questions. The majority of question paper errors reported this summer were Category 2 errors. In these cases there was no evidence of any impact on the students' ability to answer the affected questions.

The following Category 1 question paper errors were found to have had some impact on students' performance, and the exam boards took action to minimise, as far as possible, any unfair advantage or disadvantage.

- **Pearson – AS Music Technology**

This paper was sat by 4558 students in England. The sound on a CD that students were asked to listen to was presented in mono. There were two questions on the paper that were affected, as they specifically asked about the use of the stereo field. Pearson reviewed students' responses and found that they had been affected by this error. Pearson therefore decided to discount the marks for the two affected questions and reduce the total marks for the paper.

- **OCR – GCSE Design and Technology (Modified Paper)**

This enlarged version of a standard question paper was sat by two students. Changes introduced to a diagram when it was enlarged made one question confusing. OCR reviewed the students' responses and found that one student had been affected. OCR therefore awarded this student the marks that were available for this question to avoid them being disadvantaged.

- **IBO – Diploma Programme: Latin Standard Level**

This paper was sat by 95 students in England. A set text referred to within the question paper was from a higher-level syllabus that students would not have been expected to study, making it difficult for them to answer the questions. IBO

reviewed the impact and the marks awarded to students, making adjustments where necessary to ensure students were not disadvantaged.

■ **IBO – Diploma Programme: Chinese Standard Level**

This paper was sat by 28 students in England. All four options in a multiple choice question were incorrect. This question was discounted and total marks for the paper were reduced. IBO reviewed the marking for students who were predicted a higher grade and were within one mark of the grade boundary and their work was re-marked to minimise any disadvantage.

OCR also reported to us that an identical series of questions from a January 2010 version of a question paper for AS Chemistry had been repeated on a question paper this summer. This had the potential to unfairly advantage some students who may have used the January 2010 version of the question paper as a practice paper.

In December 2011, following a number of serious question paper errors, we published our report, “Inquiry into examination errors – summer 2011”. The report identified a number of weaknesses within question paper development processes that needed immediate action from exam boards offering GCSEs and A levels. AQA, OCR, Pearson, WJEC and CCEA each gave us an undertaking¹⁷ setting out how they would make improvements to reduce the number of question paper errors. We then closely monitored whether each exam board delivered against the required actions.

We reviewed these undertakings for AQA, Pearson and WJEC in January/February 2014. AQA’s and WJEC’s undertakings were discharged, as we were satisfied they had carried out the agreed actions. We will leave Pearson’s undertaking in place until we have firm evidence that the required improvements have been achieved. We will shortly be reviewing OCR’s progress against their undertaking. We have reviewed the errors that occurred on IBO question papers this summer, as well as their proposed actions to reduce the likelihood of future errors. We will be auditing IBO’s question paper development process early in 2015 and we will then decide whether it is necessary to take any further action.

Malpractice

We do not require exam boards to report the details of all individual malpractice investigations to us but we do collect data on the number of allegations investigated and their outcomes. Exam boards are required to report to us the cases that have the potential to cause an Adverse Effect. In the context of malpractice, this usually

¹⁷ An undertaking is a formal agreement, in writing, to take particular action(s) which is given by an awarding organisation to Ofqual, in accordance with General Condition B8.

means cases that could affect overall results rather than individual cases of student malpractice. If this is found to be the case, exam boards will take further action to minimise any Adverse Effect.

During the summer 2014 exam series we received seven notifications from exam boards regarding individual malpractice cases. We monitored how exam boards dealt with these cases to ensure appropriate action was taken where necessary.

We also publish data separately on the total volume of reported malpractice in GCSEs and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in summer 2014.¹⁸ Malpractice includes any breach of the regulations that might undermine the integrity of an exam, from attempts by candidates to communicate with each other during an exam, to school or college staff breaking the rules.

In summer 2014, exam boards issued 2550 penalties to students, 1.5 per cent lower than the equivalent in summer 2013. These represent only 0.012 per cent of all entries. The most frequent reason for a penalty being issued was students taking unauthorised material into an exam; in many cases the unauthorised material is a mobile phone or other communications device.

Exam boards issued 119 penalties to school or college staff, compared to 97 in summer 2013. These are penalties for malpractice committed by an individual member of staff at a school or college.

Where there is evidence that malpractice is the result of a serious management failure, an exam board may apply sanctions against a whole school/college or to a department. There were 217 penalties issued to schools and colleges in 2014, up 61 per cent on summer 2013.

It is, however, important to note the impact of changes to the qualifications for summer 2014. From 2014 GCSEs taken in England were 'linear' in that all assessments had to be taken at the end of the period of study. Also, from 2014 there were no January assessments for AS or A level in England. This means that entries that previously would have been made throughout the year in a modular system are now made in the summer, leading to a large rise in entries in summer 2014. These changes limit the meaningfulness of comparisons over time and it is possible that the increase in penalties could reflect the increase in entries.

¹⁸ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/malpractice-in-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2014-exam-series

The full report has more information, including historical data back to 2009/10.¹⁹

Whistle-blower allegations

We handle whistle-blower²⁰ allegations that are reported directly to us, either from whistle-blowers directly, or else referred to us by others such as the Department for Education (DfE), Skills Funding Agency (SFA) or Ofsted. When we receive a whistle-blower allegation we usually refer it to the relevant exam board(s) to investigate and report back. We monitor the action taken by the exam board to investigate and deal with any issues. If an exam board is implicated, we review the evidence to determine whether to investigate the allegations ourselves.

We have handled a total of 18 whistle-blower cases in relation to GCSEs, GCEs, IGCSEs and IBO Diplomas taken during the summer 2014 exam period. The number of cases for each exam board is summarised below (note that some allegations affected more than one exam board and so there are more than 18 cases in Table 4).

Table 4: Whistle-blower cases, May to September 2014

	Number of whistle blower cases
AQA	8
CIE	2
IBO	0
OCR	1
Pearson	6
WJEC	6

Of the 18 whistle-blower allegations received, 15 related to school and college malpractice in controlled assessments and three related to school/college and student malpractice in exams. GCSE and IGCSE English were the most likely to be the subject of allegations, featuring in 14 of the 18 allegations.

The most frequent types of alleged malpractice in controlled assessments were teachers providing improper assistance to students, schools falsifying students' results and schools failing to supervise students under controlled conditions. We

¹⁹ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/malpractice-in-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2014-exam-series

²⁰ In this context we use the term 'whistle-blower' to mean anyone from within or outside a school, college or other organisation who makes an allegation to us.

closely monitored the exam boards' handling of these allegations to satisfy ourselves that they were taking appropriate action.

4. Post-summer results issues

Some issues arose after results were issued in August. Some of the processing issues reported here came to light as a result of enquiries about results or complaints made by schools and colleges. Most of the issues reported here are data processing errors rather than errors in marking. Nevertheless they affect students' results and they also affect public confidence in the results issued, and so we monitor closely the actions taken by exam boards. We have not included issues that exam boards identified and corrected before results were delivered.

Data associated with GCSE and A level exam boards' post results services is collected separately and reported in early December. The figures reported in Table 5 have been collated manually from notifications sent by exam boards.²¹ It is possible that more issues associated with the summer exam series will be discovered and reported by exam boards after the publication of this report.

The impact of the issues that have been reported to us is summarised in Table 5. Overall, 814 changes have been made to students' grades at a subject level: 796 grades have been increased and 18 grades have decreased.

On 21st August we wrote to all exam boards to clarify our reporting arrangements. As a result, we have had more notifications in relation to summer 2014 results and so it is difficult to compare with summer 2013. However, in future years we will be able to make comparisons with previous summer series.

Table 5: Grade changes reported as event notifications (at subject level)²²

	Total grade changes	Grade increases	Grade decreases
AQA	309	309	0
CIE	41	38	3
IBO	0	0	0
OCR	118	109	9
Pearson	184	184	0

²¹ Data are as at 28th November 2014 and therefore they may not reflect the final outcome in all cases. Some issues are ongoing.

²² As at 28th November 2014

WJEC	162	156	6
Total	814	796	18

AQA reported 309 grade changes, all of which are grade increases. All of these changes relate to one issue that arose because of a data processing error that affected questions worth a small number of marks that are marked automatically by a computer program using 'marking keys'. These marking keys hold decisions made by principal examiners on the answers to be awarded credit. The marking key for a small number of questions indicated the wrong responses as correct.

The issue affected the following subjects: AS Spanish, GCSE Urdu, GCSE environmental science and GCSE additional applied science. AQA became aware of this issue following a post-results query from a school. A number of AS Spanish students should have received a lower mark; we discussed this with AQA and agreed for those students who are going on to study A level Spanish, the correct AS marks will be carried forward. AQA has notified those students affected.

AQA has been working with their e-marking supplier to understand fully the root cause of this issue and to review their operational processes in order to minimise recurrence.

WJEC reported a similar issue but the impact was very limited and it did not affect any students' grades.

Pearson reported 184 grade changes, all of which were grade increases. These relate to one case that arose because of an error in a mark scheme for an AS biology question paper – in a multiple choice question the mark scheme indicated the wrong response as correct. The issue came to light when one school contacted Pearson to ask if the mark scheme was correct. The error meant that students who should have received a mark did not, and some of those who should not have received a mark for the question were credited with a mark. A number of AS students should have received a lower mark; we discussed this with Pearson and agreed that for those students who are going on to study A level biology, correct AS marks will be carried forward. Pearson has notified those students affected.

WJEC reported 162 grade changes (156 grade increases and 6 grade decreases). These relate to a number of different issues including: students incorrectly being marked absent by examiners; marks not being awarded on e-marked scripts where students had submitted answers on additional pages; and incorrect marks being entered by examiners. These issues affected small numbers of students in arts, humanities and languages subjects at GCSE and A level.

OCR reported a total of 118 grade changes (109 increases and 9 decreases). These relate to a number of different issues. In some cases, revised marks for papers that were re-marked prior to results were not taken into account in the results that were issued. In other cases, inaccurate marking identified during pre-results checks was not corrected before results were issued. And for some question papers that had optional questions, some examiners mistakenly attributed 'no response' to students' answers that should have been marked.

These issues affected the grades of students in a number of arts, humanities and languages subjects at GCSE and A level. The 'no response' issue accounts for 77 of OCR's overall 118 grade changes notified to us, and it came to light as a result of enquiries about results and complaints from schools and colleges. As this had also been a problem in summer 2013, OCR put in additional checks to detect any incorrect 'no response' students. While the numbers were smaller in summer 2014, the issue has not gone away despite the additional checks in place. We expect OCR to put in place arrangements to ensure this problem does not recur in summer 2015.

CIE reported 41 grade changes (38 increases and 3 decreases). These relate to a number of different issues including: examiners wrongly attributing 'no response' to students' answers that should have received marks (the same issue as for OCR, since both exam boards use the same onscreen marking technology); marks not being correctly scaled when students' grades are being calculated; and errors in the transcription of marks that were not corrected before grades were issued. These issues affected students' grades in the following subjects: IGCSE first language English; IGCSE English literature; IGCSE enterprise²³; Pre-U economics; Pre-U art history; and Pre-U Mandarin Chinese.

Quality of marking in GCSE and A level

Over the autumn, various concerns about quality of marking in GCSEs and A levels have been reported in the media and other forums. These have included examples of very significant grade changes and have, naturally, led some to suggest that the quality of marking is deteriorating.

In October 2014 we published interim statistics on summer 2014 enquiries about results²⁴ for GCSE and A level. At the same time we also published details of the

²³ At the time of writing, we are awaiting further information on this.

²⁴ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/enquiries-about-results-ears-for-gcse-and-gce-provisional-statistics-summer-2014-examination-series

other actions we are taking²⁵, which include requiring exam boards to improve their monitoring of examiners, and longer-term work to develop better measures of marking quality, to identify good practice in mark scheme design and to evaluate the effectiveness of examiner training.

We also wrote to exam boards requiring them to carry out further analysis of their enquiries about results data. We requested a more detailed breakdown of the reasons for grade changes, with a particular focus on those cases where results changed by more than one grade.

Changes of two or more grades are relatively rare but are indefensible in that they cannot be explained by legitimate differences of opinion between examiners and they have a significant impact on students and schools. In all exam boards, changes of more than one grade represent only one per cent of all grade changes following enquiries about results. Exam boards told us that in many cases these grade changes are caused by clerical errors – incorrect addition or transcription of marks – rather than poor quality of marking. These types of errors occur more in paper-based marking than onscreen marking.

Exam boards have provided us with details of actions they will take to minimise changes of more than one grade. In one example, an exam board identified an issue with a particular mark scheme that caused a number of additional errors; this will be changed for future exams. In another case, a particular unit was identified as challenging for examiners, because of the discursive and subjective nature of the questions, and so the exam board will consider for next year how they might improve examiner recruitment and training to improve marking consistency.

Over 99 per cent of grade changes were by one grade – generally to a higher grade but in a small number of cases to a lower grade. Although the exact percentage varies by board, over 80 per cent of the mark changes were within the original marking tolerance²⁶. This is in line with the 78 per cent of mark changes within the original marking tolerance that we reported for 2012 data in our report on quality of marking²⁷ (which included qualifications other than GCSE and A level).

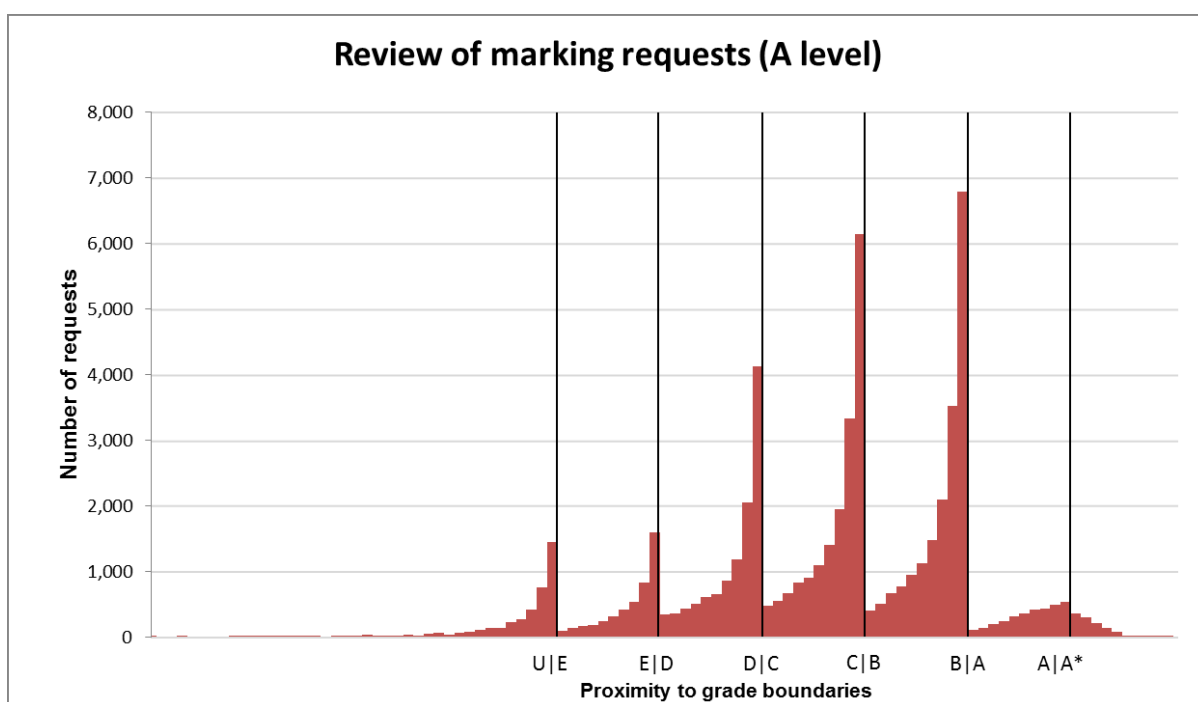
²⁵ www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/378164/2014-10-21-ofquals-work-on-quality-of-marking.pdf

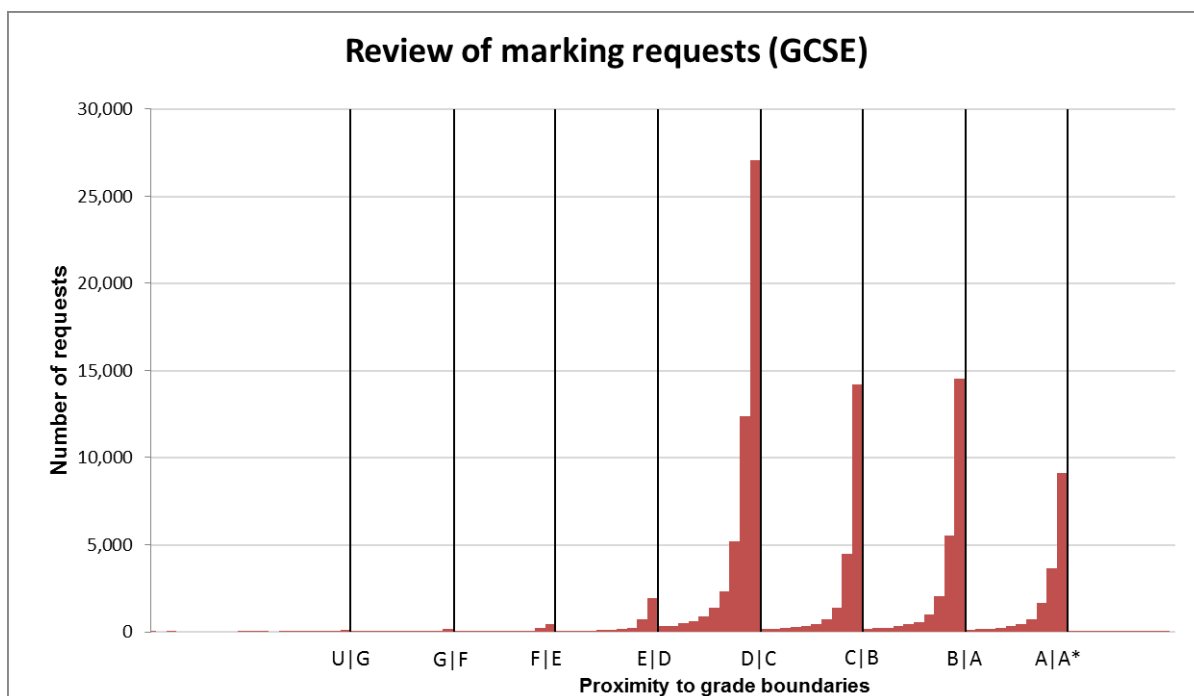
²⁶ The marking tolerance is a measure used during live marking to judge whether an examiner's marking is acceptable. It varies according to the subject and type of question but generally reflects the legitimate difference of opinion between two equally skilled examiners.

²⁷ www.ofqual.gov.uk/documents/quality-of-marking-final-report

A substantial majority of the mark changes this summer are likely to have arisen from legitimate differences in the opinions of subject experts (examiners), as measured by the marking tolerance. In many cases, where students are just below a grade boundary, these differences of opinion will often mean a higher grade. Conversely, where students are just above a grade boundary, similar differences of opinion might result in a lower grade. Changes as a result of post-results enquiries are more likely to be upward because schools are much more likely to challenge results that are just below a grade boundary than other results. Examiners carrying out reviews of marking will be aware that students are often just below a grade boundary and so are more likely to give students the 'benefit of the doubt' and award additional marks.

The following graphs from one exam board show how the review of marking (service 2) enquiries are spread across the mark range. The peaks represent students whose marks are just below the grade boundary.





WJEC reported that 37 per cent of GCSE and 22 per cent of A level grade changes were for students who were one or two marks below a grade boundary.

All exam boards have noted how the increase in post-results enquiries outstrips the increase in script volume in summer 2014. They have also noted the many external factors – including the move to linear exams and the changes to performance tables where only the first entry counts – that may have made it more likely that schools would challenge their results this summer.

We have published separately the final data on enquiries about results for GCSEs and A levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.²⁸

More exams in summer 2014 meant that there were more enquiries. Entries were up by 11 per cent, the number of enquiries rose by 48 per cent and the number of qualification grades challenged rose by 26 per cent.

In total, 77,400 qualification grades were changed. This represents less than one per cent of all grades issued and 18.7 per cent of all grades challenged.

The higher volume of enquiries meant that turnaround times by exam boards were slightly longer, although still within agreed timescales. Reviews of marking took, on

²⁸ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/enquiries-about-results-for-gcse-and-a-level-summer-2014-exam-series

average, 12 days, compared to 10 days in 2013. Priority reviews (A level only) took, on average, seven days, compared to five days in 2013.

The full report has more information, including historical data back to 2009/10.

Ofqual's reporting on summer issues

During the autumn we publish a number of official statistics bulletins. As well as those on malpractice and enquiries about results already mentioned, we also report details of the number of access arrangements and special consideration requests for GCSE and A level.

Access arrangements

Exam boards must make reasonable adjustments for students with a disability, to enable them to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding in assessments. The exam boards provide various access arrangements, for example enlarged versions of question papers for students with visual impairments. Schools or colleges can request one or more types of access arrangements for students. We collect data from the exam boards and publish details of the volume and type of access arrangements used over the course of an academic year.

In the 2013/14 academic year there were 271,850 requests for access arrangements. This is up 10 per cent on 2012/13 but is more in line with the number of requests in the 2011/12 academic year. The most frequently granted access arrangement was for up to 25 per cent extra time, with 132,050 approved requests.

The second most frequent access arrangement was the use of a reader, and the third was the use of a scribe. Taken together, the use of up to 25 per cent extra time, a reader and a scribe accounted for 90 per cent of all approved access arrangements.

In summer 2014, the number of requests for modified question papers increased by 56 per cent to 28,700. This increase is partly explained by more exams being sat in summer 2014 compared to summer 2013.

The full report has more information, including historical data back to 2009/10.²⁹

Special consideration

Special consideration applies where a student has covered the course material but is either unable, through temporary illness, injury or indisposition, to be present for part

²⁹ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-arrangements-for-gcse-and-gce-summer-2014

of the assessment, or is disadvantaged in some way while taking the assessment. Most special consideration requests apply to question papers but a small number apply to coursework or controlled assessment tasks.

In summer 2014 the number of requests for special consideration increased by 20 per cent – from 413,150 in summer 2013 to 496,500 in summer 2014. This is in line with the increase of 18 per cent in the number of exam papers that were sat. Requests for special consideration were made for just under three per cent of all papers sat.

There are two categories of special consideration. Where students were present for an assessment but disadvantaged in some way, their marks can be adjusted. Over 95 per cent of the special consideration requests that were approved were for mark adjustments. The procedures allow for an adjustment of up to five per cent of the maximum mark for the question paper. The most frequent mark adjustment, in 27 per cent of cases, was three per cent of the maximum mark.

Where students cannot be present for the assessment, an award can be made on the basis of other assessments completed. Just under five per cent of the approved special consideration requests were for such awards.

The full report has more information, including historical data back to 2011³⁰.

5. Conclusion

This report covers a number of issues that exam boards manage during and after the summer series. Because of the scale of the summer exam series, it is arguably inevitable that exam boards will have a small number of question paper errors and small scale security breaches. We believe that exam boards should do everything possible to avoid such occurrences, and that they should learn lessons where they do occur. We are content that where they did happen, they were managed appropriately in summer 2014.

We closely monitor the standard setting in GCSEs and A levels and we are content that the exam boards have maintained standards appropriately in summer 2014.

Other areas covered by this report give us cause for concern. It is essential that schools and colleges are able to request access arrangements and special consideration on behalf of their students. However, it is difficult to explain the increasing trend towards making these requests in terms of legitimate changes in

³⁰ www.gov.uk/government/statistics/special-consideration-in-gcse-and-gce-summer-2014

students' circumstances. Could the increases be a sign of rising pressure on schools, given recent changes to the system? We have already requested additional data from the exam boards so we can investigate these issues further.

Increases in penalties issued for malpractice also concern us. We have recently required exam boards to tighten up their arrangements for dealing with malpractice: the increases in penalties could be a reflection of that. We have a programme of work to look more closely at malpractice.

We are particularly concerned about the increases in the number of enquiries about results. The data suggest that very serious errors are relatively rare, but schools and colleges tell us otherwise. We know that these qualifications are hugely significant for students, their parents and for schools and colleges. Marking quality is generally good but it is not yet good enough, and we will continue to require exam boards to improve their training and monitoring of examiners.

We also plan to overhaul the enquiries about results system in future, so that it can better distinguish between marking errors and differences of opinion between equally skilled professionals, particularly in those subjects where more subjective judgements of the quality of student work are necessary. As any changes will have significant implications for schools and colleges, we are considering very carefully the feasibility of possible options.

Improving marking quality is a key programme of work for us. We have started work to develop better measures of marking quality, to identify good practice in mark scheme design and to evaluate the effectiveness of examiner training.

We are already discussing with exam boards the arrangements for 2015, including additional checks they can put in place to improve marking quality. There are few changes to the qualifications being offered for 2015 but the delivery risks remain the same and we will monitor closely exam boards' preparations for the summer.

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