



## Schools: GCSE English grading issues

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This note provides a brief summary of the key events surrounding the issue of the GCSE results in English for students, following the publication of results on 23 August 2012.

On 31 August, the regulator Ofqual produced an interim report which found that the “issue is the January, not the June grade boundaries”. Ofqual added that “revisiting the June grade boundaries would contradict our responsibility to maintain standards over time and make sure results are comparable year-on-year” although the regulator did offer early re-sits in November 2012.

In response, it is reported that teachers’ unions are preparing legal action with the aim of quashing the relevant June results.

As well as offering early re-sits in November 2012, the Welsh Government has ordered the WJEC to regrade the GCSE English results for pupils in Wales. This could mean that the same work could attract a higher grade in Wales than it would in England.

On 17 September, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, announced changes to the GCSE examinations, with core academic subjects being examined through an English Baccalaureate; the new approach would begin in September 2015, with the first results in 2017.

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### **1 Immediate reaction to the GCSE English results and Ofqual enquiry**

Following the announcement of the GCSE results on 23 August, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) issued a statement which included the following:

We are aware that concerns have been raised about results for GCSE English. This summer most students have taken new syllabuses in GCSE English language rather than English. There have also been changes to the entry patterns of candidates. Approximately 20,000 candidates from independent / selective schools have moved to other qualifications, while overall, entry to the qualification was up. This is likely to be the result of fewer students entering early in the winter series and instead being included in the summer results. The proportion of English students achieving an A\* to C grade this summer fell by 1.5 per cent.

There have been particular concerns raised about changes to grade boundaries for Controlled Assessment units in English. Where students take exams in different units spread across a couple of years, the exam boards have to consider all of the evidence available for each exam series and make decisions to make sure that the right qualification standards are achieved. Grade boundaries can change from exam series to exam series. Decisions on grade boundaries are made after the assessments have been taken, based on all the available evidence. In the summer, more information was available about performance across the qualification than in January. Exam boards considered this and made decisions accordingly, to make sure that the final qualification grades were comparable with last year's.

We are confident that standards have been maintained and that the grades awarded are right. The performance required to achieve each grade is the same as last year. Differences in pass rates reflect differences in the group of students taking the exams.<sup>1</sup>

On 25 August *The Guardian* reported that “headteachers across the country demanded a ‘total re-mark’ of all English papers taken by their students this year”.<sup>2</sup>

On the evening of 25 August, Ofqual announced that it would “look closely at concerns over GCSE English results”. In a reply to the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the Chief Regulator of Ofqual, Glenys Stacey, noted that there were “questions about how grade

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<sup>1</sup> Ofqual, *GCSE Results*, 24 August 2012, website [taken on 18 September 2012]

<sup>2</sup> “GCSE results: angry headteachers demand total re-mark of English papers”, *The Guardian*, 25 August 2012

boundaries were set in a very small number of units across the year' which have caused concern", and that Ofqual would "look closely over the coming days at the detail of grade C boundary setting for some of this very small number of units".<sup>3</sup>

A few days later, Ofqual published a Q&A webpage about the English GCSE results, which included the following:

We remain confident that this year's GCSE results – across all subjects - are comparable with last year's and reflect the right standards. The overall pass rate at grades A\* to C fell 0.4 per cent, which properly reflects differences in the group of students and the qualifications. But there are clearly concerns about the grade boundaries within units of the English GCSEs. We want to understand what these concerns are and we will look immediately, thoroughly, and quickly into these issues.<sup>4</sup>

Ofqual provided details of how their enquiry would proceed:

#### **How are you going to do this?**

As well as speaking with representative groups (teacher and head teacher organisations and others), we will meet exam boards and look closely at the available data on awarding and grade boundary setting for particular units. We will be continuing with this data analysis over the next few days.

We have contacted the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), and they are assisting us with details of the precise concerns of their members. We have arranged to meet with representatives of NAHT and ASCL to discuss the concerns that they are collating for us now.

We will be meeting with a selection of school leaders in Leeds and in Bradford because of particular concerns expressed about results in those cities.

We are also analysing our helpline calls and emails received, to see what patterns are emerging.

#### **When will you report on your work?**

We expect to produce an initial report of what we find by Friday [31 August] of this week. By then we will have a good understanding of the concerns and a provisional view about what, if anything, needs to happen.<sup>5</sup>

On the question, "are the exam boards going to re-grade all of the GCSE English exams?", Ofqual stated: "we will not speculate on any possible outcomes from our look at the concerns being raised about some grade boundaries. We will take action as appropriate. At this stage, our focus is on understanding the concerns people are bringing to us".<sup>6</sup>

## **2 Ofqual interim report and reaction**

On 31 August, Ofqual published their initial report, which was reported as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Ofqual, *Ofqual to look closely at GCSE concerns*, 25 August 2012, website [taken on 18 September 2012]. The letter to the General Secretary of the NAHT, Russell Hobby, can be found at: <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/downloads/category/132-correspondence?download=1474%3Aletter-to-naht-about-gcse-grading-august-2012>

<sup>4</sup> Ofqual, *Questions and Answers, GCSE English 2012*, 28 August 2012, website [taken on 18 September 2012]

<sup>5</sup> Ofqual, *Questions and Answers, GCSE English 2012*, 28 August 2012, website [taken on 18 September 2012]

<sup>6</sup> Ofqual, *Questions and Answers, GCSE English 2012*, 28 August 2012, website [taken on 18 September 2012]

England's exams regulator, Ofqual, has refused to order exam boards to regrade this summer's English GCSE in a row over this year's results.

It acknowledged grade boundaries had changed part way through the year, but stood by the new June grading system.

Instead of regrading, pupils would be offered early resits in November, Ofqual said.

Head teachers' union, ASCL, said the move was wholly unacceptable and is threatening legal action.<sup>7</sup>

Ofqual said that its:

review of this summer's GCSE English results has concluded that while the overall subject grades awarded were correct, it believes that assessments marked in January 2012 were "graded generously".

Ofqual explained that:

A minority of candidates sat their units in January, and again we have looked at how grade boundaries were set then. Again, examiners used their best professional judgement, but they had less information to go on, less hard data to help them come to a judgement. This was both because most candidates were not sitting at that time and, because these were new qualifications, examiners could not rely absolutely on how standards were set in past years.

[...]

Some schools were over reliant on the January 2012 grade boundaries particularly in relation to written controlled assessment. Exam boards published the grade boundaries set in January 2012, and although these had a caveat, many schools used these to set expectations. For schools, as for exam boards, this will have been their first experience of dealing with modularised GCSEs for most English departments. Both could have shared a better understanding of the use made of grade boundaries.<sup>8</sup>

When exam boards came to set grade boundaries in June they were better equipped to make judgements as there was more information available due to the larger group of students taking the assessment. The grade boundaries in June were higher.

[...]

On the basis of the work carried out by Ofqual so far, our initial findings are:

- For GCSE English this summer, a complex and unique set of circumstances came together to create a highly unusual situation for schools, colleges and their students.
- The standard set for the GCSE English is comparable with the standard in previous years.
- June grade boundaries were properly set, and candidates work properly graded.

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<sup>7</sup> "English GCSEs will not be regraded, says Ofqual", *BBC News*, 31 August 2012

<sup>8</sup> Ofqual, *GCSE English Awards 2012: A Regulatory Report*, 31 August 2012, pp5 and 6

- The issue is the January, not the June grade boundaries.
- Understandably, schools were over-reliant on the January 2012 boundaries to set expectations as there was little other information available to them.

As a result, we have agreed:

- Revisiting the June grade boundaries would contradict our responsibility to maintain standards over time and make sure results are comparable year-on-year. The June boundaries are right.
- It would not be appropriate to revisit the January grade boundaries. That would mean lowering the grades of other students which would lead to further concerns over unfairness.
- Each of the exam boards offering GCSE English and English Language will provide an exceptional, one off resit opportunity in November 2012.
- Exam boards will review the advice and guidance they give to schools about GCSE English including its structure, how grade boundaries are set and how they should be used.
- School and colleges who have submitted an Enquiry About Result (EAR) for a candidate due to concerns over grade boundaries can withdraw this and incur no cost if they no longer wish to pursue it. EARs do not look at grade boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

The full report by Ofqual is available [here](#),<sup>10</sup> and sets out the “complex and unique set of circumstances” referred to above:

Three things came together, and made the job of setting standards difficult in January 2012:

- First, changes to the syllabuses themselves
- Second, the nature of English as a subject. English subject examiners have found that setting standards in English, in new qualifications, is difficult.
- Third, the structure of the qualifications. They are made up of a combination of modules and they have a high proportion of controlled assessment (60 per cent).

In short, grades awarded for the June modules were right, but it is hard to square them with the January results.<sup>11</sup>

However, the report did little to placate critics of Ofqual’s approach: it was reported that “teachers said resits this autumn would be of no use to pupils who needed their results now. Union leaders resumed calls for an official inquiry and threatened legal action”.<sup>12</sup>

The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) said that Ofqual’s interim report “fails to address the key issue that the standards applied during the year have been inconsistent

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<sup>9</sup> Ofqual, *Ofqual report on GCSE English results finds January assessments were graded generously*, website [taken on 18 September 2012]

<sup>10</sup> See: <http://www.ofqual.gov.uk/files/2012-08-31-gcse-english-awards-2012-a-regulatory-report.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ofqual, *GCSE English Awards 2012: A Regulatory Report*, 31 August 2012, p6

<sup>12</sup> “GCSE results row: students to be offered special resits in November”, *The Guardian*, 31 August 2012

with devastating consequences for many thousands of students”. The ASCL General Secretary, Brian Lightman, said:

Teachers and students acted in good faith, followed advice and feedback from the awarding bodies during the year, and worked to the approximate grade boundaries given to them. They accept that grade boundaries can change by a couple of marks, but to change by 10 or more makes a mockery of the system. It suggests that the arrangements for moderation of controlled assessment were inadequate. You cannot say that the standards are comparable to last year when the grade have been changed halfway through.<sup>13</sup>

The NAHT said that it was “extremely disappointed by the findings in Ofqual’s interim report into GCSE English and is warning decisive action must be taken”, adding that it was “dismayed that Ofqual’s report fails to acknowledge the damage to both individual students and the system, caused by unprecedented shifts in grade boundaries”. The NAHT’s General Secretary said that “our call for results to be re-graded remains”, and that “there is still the potential for a legal challenge and we are working with other teaching unions to explore all options”.<sup>14</sup>

On 3 September, Education questions took place on the floor of the House, during which the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, said:

Let me take this opportunity to underline my admiration for the work done by York schools and York head teachers. I share the sadness that many teachers and students will feel about what happened with GCSE English this year. It is appropriate that we should all learn lessons about some of the mistakes made in introducing an examination, modular in style, that was not best equipped to ensure that all students could perform well and be treated fairly.

The hon. Gentleman invites me to tell Ofqual what it should do. I will not, because the Secretary of State for Education when the hon. Gentleman supported the Government, Mr Ed Balls, pointed out that Ofqual was an independent regulator of standards, independent of Ministers and reporting directly to Parliament and he said:

“I am not going to second-guess its work.”—[Official Report, 23 February 2009; Vol. 488, c. 27.]

I hold to that position.<sup>15</sup>

There then followed an exchange of questions on the GCSE grading issue ([HC Deb 3 September 2012 cc10–12](#)) in which the Secretary of State said “these examinations are unfit for purpose and need to change”, adding that the Government would be “removing modules and reforming examinations”.<sup>16</sup>

### **3 Allegations about when the problem was first known**

On 7 September, the *Times Education Supplement* (TES) reported that “Ofqual first identified a major problem at the heart of this summer’s English GCSE grading crisis almost three years ago but failed to act on it”, adding:

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<sup>13</sup> ASCL, [Ofqual report fails to address key issue](#), 31 August 2012

<sup>14</sup> NAHT, [Ofqual fudge fails thousands of students; head teachers call for urgent action](#), 31 August 2012

<sup>15</sup> [HC Deb 3 September 2012 c9](#)

<sup>16</sup> [HC Deb 3 September 2012 c11](#)

The exams watchdog highlighted concerns that modular GCSEs created particular risks in maintaining standards because they allowed pupils to “bank” grades early. It even came up with a workable solution that might have avoided the row that has erupted since last week, but decided not to implement it.<sup>17</sup>

#### **4 Select Committee hearing and the issue of “overruling” Edexcel**

The Education Select Committee held its first hearing of its inquiry into the GCSE issue on 11 September, hearing from union leaders and a school principal, before taking evidence from the Chief Regulator of Ofqual.<sup>18</sup> It was subsequently reported that “Ofqual was prepared to force exam board to change GCSE boundaries”:

Glenys Stacey, the head of the exams watchdog Ofqual, has admitted that she would have forced one of England's biggest exam boards to alter its GCSE English boundaries to avoid grade inflation had it not agreed to voluntarily this summer.

The regulator has the power to direct grade boundary changes and would have done so if Edexcel had not revised them this summer, she suggested. Exam boards moved the grade boundaries this summer in order to avoid inflation in the results, leading to an outcry from schools complaining that their students had been moved down a grade.<sup>19</sup>

This followed the leaking of letters between Ofqual and Edexcel, in which it was reported that:

Ofqual urged an exam board to alter its GCSE English grade boundaries two weeks before the results were published. Leaked letters show the regulator wrote to Edexcel amid concerns that there would be a rise in the number of C grades, calling on the board to act quickly to produce results closer to predictions for the subject.

The board responded a day later saying it believed its proposed grade awards were “fair” and that there was no justification for further changes.<sup>20</sup>

#### **5 Threat of legal action**

On 14 September, TES reported that “a landmark legal challenge to this summer’s GCSE English results is expected to begin next week as figures show that already disadvantaged pupils have been disproportionately hit by controversial grading changes”, with “lawyers confident that judges would quash June GCSE marks”.<sup>21</sup>

#### **6 English Baccalaureate to replace GCSEs in core subjects**

On 17 September, and further to his comments at the Dispatch Box on 3 September, the Secretary of State announced changes to the GCSE examinations, with core academic subjects being examined through an English Baccalaureate.

Explaining the decision, he said that the Government “want to ensure that modules—which encourage bite-size learning and spoon-feeding, teaching to the test and gaming of the system—go, once and for all. We want to remove controlled assessment and coursework from core subjects”.

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<sup>17</sup> “Ofqual flagged grading issue three years ago”, TES, 7 September 2012

<sup>18</sup> Education Select Committee, *Education Committee explores grading of this year's GCSE English exams*, 11 September 2012

<sup>19</sup> “Ofqual was prepared to force exam board to change GCSE boundaries”, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2012

<sup>20</sup> “Exam board ‘pressed by Ofqual to alter GCSE grades’”, *The Guardian*, 11 September 2012

<sup>21</sup> “Heads turn to the law over grading scandal”, TES, 14 September 2012

Mr Gove added that “we will end the competition between exam boards, which has led to a race to the bottom, with different boards offering easier courses or assistance to teachers, in a corrupt effort to massage up pass rates”, and instead “invite exam boards to offer wholly new qualifications in the core subject areas of English, mathematics, the sciences, history, geography and languages. In each subject area, only one exam board will offer the new exams”:

We plan to call the new qualifications in core academic subjects English baccalaureate certificates, recognising that they are the academic foundation that is the secure basis on which further study, vocational learning or a satisfying apprenticeship can be built. Success in English, mathematics, the sciences, a humanities subject and a language will mean that the student has the full English baccalaureate.<sup>22</sup>

In terms of implementation, the Secretary of State said:

These reforms are radical, so we will consult widely. Their introduction will require careful preparation, so we propose the first teaching of the new certificates in English, maths and the sciences in September 2015, with other subjects following. To ensure that the benefits of this more rigorous approach to the English baccalaureate subjects are felt across the whole curriculum, we will ask Ofqual to consider how the new higher standards could be used as a template for judging and accrediting a new suite of qualifications, beyond those subjects, to replace the entire suite of GCSEs.<sup>23</sup>

## 7 Regrading in Wales

On 10 September, Leighton Andrews, the Minister for Education and Skills in the Welsh Government, issued a written statement to the National Assembly for Wales entitled *Statement on the publication of: GCSE English Language 2012 – an investigation into the outcomes for candidates in Wales*.

In his statement, the Minister said that he was “publishing the outcomes of our own investigation into what happened this year with the awarding of the GCSE English language qualification in Wales”. While the review “agrees with Ofqual’s findings that there were issues related to grade boundary changes made to some units between January and June”, he also noted that:

More significantly for Welsh learners, the report also finds that candidates from Wales, as a cohort, were awarded lower grades than would normally have been expected under agreed regulatory principles of working to maintain comparable outcomes when new specifications are introduced. They have identified significant problems with the methodology adopted and its application to Wales. The report states “it seems probable that a serious distortion to the outcomes of the candidates in Wales has been caused”, and that a 3.9 percentage point fall in outcomes for all grades C and above in 2012, when compared to 2011, “is unjustifiable and almost certainly unfair to candidates”. The report highlights several reasons why this was the case.

As a result, the Minister called it an “apparent injustice” that had been “served to hundreds of Welsh learners”, a matter which “needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency”. The response was to undertake a regarding exercise of GCSE English results in Wales:

Whilst recognising that the WJEC made its initial awards in compliance with regulatory requirements, I have today asked the WJEC to re-award its GCSE English Language

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<sup>22</sup> [HC Deb 17 September 2012 c654](#)

<sup>23</sup> [HC Deb 17 September 2012 c655](#)



in line with the report's recommendations and in order to achieve outcomes that are as similar as possible to the outcomes achieved by candidates in 2011. Until we have discussed the position with WJEC it is difficult to be precise as to how long this process will take but I understand that the regrading exercise itself should be achievable within a few days.

My officials have suggested to Ofqual that the results of WJEC English Language candidates in England should be similarly re-awarded and those discussions will continue. This is a matter for Ofqual.

The Minister provided the following justification for his actions: "my responsibility is to ensure fairness to the GCSE candidates in Wales. Regulatory officials have identified the problems, and recommended actions. I have implemented their recommendations". The Minister added that Welsh pupils could take part in the early re-sits organised by Ofqual.

In terms of the strategic approach to exam regulation in Wales, the Minister said:

Clearly this whole episode raises serious questions about the regulation of qualifications in Wales and I have asked officials for further advice on this and will be making a statement in due course, building on the report on the structure of the examinations market in Wales published earlier this year. I will also be asking Huw Evans and his Project Board to consider the remainder of the report's recommendations as part of the ongoing Review of 14 to 19 Qualifications in Wales which will be submitting its report in November.<sup>24</sup>

As the BBC noted in its report, the decision by the Welsh Government "means pupils in England who took the disputed GCSE English exam could end up with a lower grade for the same work as their counterparts in Wales".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Welsh Government, *Statement on the publication of: GCSE English Language 2012 – an investigation into the outcomes for candidates in Wales*, 10 September 2012, website [taken on 19 September 2012]; see also <http://wales.gov.uk/docs//cabinetstatements/2012/120910gcseenglishlanguage2012en.doc>

<sup>25</sup> "GCSE English: WJEC ordered to regrade exams", *BBC News*, 11 September 2012