

Summer 2016 GCSE, AS and A level awards: a summary of our monitoring



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Introduction

This document summarises the actions we have taken in monitoring the summer 2016 GCSE, AS and A level awards, including links to any correspondence, and a summary of out of tolerance awards.

Maintaining standards

Our aim in monitoring the GCSE, AS and A level awards is to achieve a level playing field for students, so that it is no easier or harder to achieve a grade in a subject with one exam board than with another. To do this, we agree with exam boards the basis for statistical predictions using prior attainment for the cohort; AS and A level predictions are based on GCSE prior attainment, and GCSE predictions are based on Key Stage 2 prior achievement. We then monitor how closely the exam boards' results are to those predictions. We set reporting tolerances around those predictions and exam boards must provide additional evidence to support any awards that are out of tolerance. Section 3 of this report provides further details on the subjects where there were out of tolerance awards this summer.

We pay close attention to the way in which different exam boards' grade standards in a subject are aligned. Ahead of results being issued, we meet with the exam boards to review the emerging results. This enables us to judge whether standards have been maintained at overall subject level.

Where we believe that exam boards' grade standards are not aligned within a subject, we have the power to require them to bring their award into line with other boards. We did this for one exam board in GCSE mathematics this summer. Although the award was within tolerance, we judged that the grade standards were out of line with those of the other boards, and we were not persuaded by the additional evidence that the exam board presented to us. We therefore [required the exam board to move one higher tier grade C boundary up by one mark](#). The award remained within tolerance and was closer to prediction.

Setting standards in new AS qualifications

There were very few changes to qualifications awarded this summer. In England (and Wales) there were new AS qualifications in a number of subjects.¹ Summer 2016 was the first year of awarding these new qualifications. We agreed with exam boards that they should carry forward standards using statistical predictions. Our intention was that, in general, a student who would have achieved a particular grade on the previous qualification would achieve the same grade on the new qualification.

Statistical predictions are the most effective way to carry forward grade standards to new qualifications, so that students in the first cohort of a new qualification are not unfairly disadvantaged. But we also knew that a reduction in students taking these new AS qualifications might make the predictions less reliable. If that turned out to be the case, and exam boards needed to rely more heavily on looking at student work, we wanted to make sure that exam boards would use senior examiner judgement in a consistent way. For this reason, we worked with the exam boards to agree a set of principles for awarding the new AS qualifications, which they all agreed.²

During awarding it emerged that one exam board had misinterpreted these principles. We did not consider this misinterpretation to have affected the outcome of any of the awards, but we did make [our interpretation of the principles clear to the exam board](#).

¹ Art and design, biology, business, chemistry, computing, economics, English language, English language and literature, English literature, history, physics, psychology, sociology

² See appendix 3 of the data exchange document <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates/reviewing-gcse-outcome-data-received-from-awarding-organisations-as-part-of-the-data-exchange-procedures-summer-2016>

Summary of out of tolerance awards

Exam boards report data to us from each of their awards³. Where the actual and predicted outcomes differ beyond a given reporting tolerance, depending on entry size, the exam board must inform us and provide additional information to support out of tolerance award.

The reporting tolerances are as follows.

Matched entry ⁴	Reporting tolerance
500 or less	Not applicable
501 – 1,000	±3%
1,001 – 3,000	±2%
3,001 or more	±1%

The above reporting tolerances apply to the following grades:

- GCSE – grades A and C
- AS – grade A
- A level – grade A

For A*, the allowable tolerance between predicted and actual outcomes is ± 2%.⁵

Where outcomes were outside the reporting tolerance, at one or more grades, these were reported to us.

This summary includes only AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC awards. In previous years we have also reported out of tolerance awards from CCEA. However, we do not regulate GCSEs, AS or A levels awarded in Northern Ireland and CCEA no longer offers its qualifications to students in England. The figures below that relate to 2015 will, therefore, be lower than the figures [we reported in August 2015](#) which did include CCEA awards. Appendix 1 includes the summaries from 2015 revised to remove the CCEA awards, in order to provide a more meaningful comparison.

³ More detail on the reporting procedures and tolerances can be found in our data exchange procedures document

² For qualifications where there were more than 500 matched entries and more than 100 of the matched entries obtained grade A cumulative overall. The only exception to this is A level French, German and Spanish, where the reporting tolerance is up to +2%.

⁴ Matched entry refers to the number of students who can be matched to their prior attainment (GCSE or Key Stage 2).

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Table 1. Total number of qualification awards reviewed in 2015 and 2016 from AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC

	2016				2015			
	Overall	A level	AS	GCSE	Overall	A level	AS	GCSE
Number of awards reviewed	702	190	263	257	658	189	210	259
Number of awards reviewed against a reporting tolerance	526	131	176	208	484	128	152	204
Number of awards outside of reporting tolerances	33	2	4	27	23	2	0	21

In summer 2016, none of the exam boards had any A level awards that were out of tolerance at the A* grade.

Table 2 shows the out of tolerance awards for A level at grade A, and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for the out of tolerance award, according to the reasons outlined in the summer 2016 data exchange procedures.⁶

Table 2. A level out of tolerance awards at grade A by subject, summer 2016

	Reporting tolerance A	Above or below tolerance at A	Reason
Art and design	±1%	Above	2 – Technical
Physical education	±3%	Above	2 – Technical

Table 3 below shows the 2016 AS awards that were out of tolerance at grade A, and our classification of the evidence provided by the exam board for the out of tolerance

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates/reviewing-gcse-outcome-data-received-from-awarding-organisations-as-part-of-the-data-exchange-procedures-november-2015>

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award, according to the reasons outlined in the summer 2016 data exchange procedures.

Table 3. AS out of tolerance awards at grade A by subject, summer 2016

	Reporting tolerance A	Above or below tolerance at A	Reason
Chemistry	±3%	Below	2 – Technical
Communication and culture	±1%	Above	2 – Technical
Economics	±2%	Below	2 – Technical
History	±2%	Below	2 – Technical

Table 4 below shows the 2016 GCSE out of tolerance awards for grades A*, A and C, and our classification of the evidence provided by the exam board for the out of tolerance award, according to the reasons outlined in the summer 2016 data exchange procedures.

Table 4. GCSE out of tolerance awards at grades A*, A and C by subject, summer 2016

	Reporting tolerance A*	Above or below tolerance at A*	Reporting tolerance at A, C	Above or below tolerance at A,C		Reason
				A	C	
Arabic	±2%	Below	±3%	Below		4 – Cohort
Applications of mathematics	±2%		±3%	Above		4 – Cohort
Art and design	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Art and design	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Classical civilisation	±2%		±3%	Above	Above	4 – Cohort
Computer science	±2%		±2%	Below	Below	4 – Cohort
Computer science	±2%	Below	±2%	Below	Below	4 – Cohort
Computing	±2%		±1%		Below	4 – Cohort
Dance	±2%		±1%		Above	3 – Aligning
D&T: product design	±2%		±2%	Above	Above	4 – Cohort
Drama	±2%		±1%		Above	4 – Cohort
Expressive arts	±2%		±3%		Above	2 – Technical
Further additional science	±2%	Above	±1%	Below	Below	2 – Technical
Further additional science	±2%	Below	±3%	Below	Below	2 – Technical
Further additional science	±2%		±1%	Below	Below	2 – Technical
Health and social care	±2%	Above	±3%	Above	Above	4 – Cohort

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Home economics: child development	±2%		±2%	Above	Above	4 – Cohort
Home Economics: food and nutrition	±2%		±2%		Above	4 – Cohort
Latin	±2%	Above	±2%	Above	Above	3 – Aligning
Mathematics	±2%		±1%		Below	4 – Cohort
Media studies	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Methods in mathematics	±2%	Above	±2%	Above		4 – Cohort
Methods in mathematics	±2%		±3%		Above	4 – Cohort
Music	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Performing arts	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Religious studies	±2%	Above	±1%	Above	Above	2 – Technical
Science	±2%		±1%		Below	4 – Cohort

Appendix 1

Out of tolerance awards 2015

The following table has been revised to remove CCEA awards, in order to provide a more meaningful comparison with the 2016 data included in this report.

GCSE out of tolerance awards summer 2015 (AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC)

	Reporting tolerance at A*	Above or below tolerance at A*	Reporting tolerance at A, C	Above or below tolerance at A,C		Reason
				A	C	
Applications of Mathematics	±2%		±2%	Above		4 – Cohort
Art and design	±2%		±1%		Above	2 – Technical
Biology	±2%		±1%	Above		3 – Aligning
Chemistry	±2%	Above	±1%			3 – Aligning
Citizenship studies	±2%		±1%	Below		4 – Cohort
Citizenship studies	±2%		±1%	Below		4 – Cohort
Classical civilisation	±2%	Above	±1%	Above	Above	4 – Cohort
Computer science	±2%		±1%		Below	4 – Cohort
Dance	±2%		±1%		Above	3 – Aligning
Economics	±2%		±1%	Above		3 – Aligning
English language (Wales)	±2%		±1%	Below	Below	4 – Cohort
Environmental and land-based science	±2%		±2%		Above	4 – Cohort
Further additional science	±2%	Below	±2%	Below	Below	3 – Aligning
Further additional science	±2%	Above	±1%	Below	Below	2 – Technical
Further additional science	±2%	Below	±1%	Below	Below	2 – Technical
Health and social care	±2%		±3%		Above	4 – Cohort
Home economics	±2%		±1%		Above	3 – Aligning
Latin	±2%	Above	±1%	Above	Above	2 – Technical
Mathematics	±2%		±1%		Below	4 – Cohort
Methods in mathematics	±2%	Above	±3%	Above		4 – Cohort
Religious studies	±2%		±1%	Above	Above	3 – Aligning
Welsh	±2%		±1%		Above	5 – Other

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	Reporting tolerance A*	Above or below tolerance A*	Reporting tolerance A	Above or below tolerance	Reason
Geography	2%	Above	1%		2 – Technical
German	2%		3%	Above	2 – Technical

AS and A level out of tolerance awards summer 2015 (AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC)

There were no AS awards that were out of tolerance.

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