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Official Statistics

Background information for Special Consideration in GCSE, AS and A level: Summer 2019 exam series

Published 5 December 2019

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Purpose

This release presents figures on the number of special consideration requests for GCSE, AS and A levels submitted by schools and colleges to exam boards for exams and non-timetabled assessments sat in summer 2019.

Geographical coverage

This report presents data on special consideration requests made in England. Five exam boards offer GCSE and GCE qualifications in England:

- AQA Education (AQA)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), until 2015
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)

- Pearson Education Ltd. (Pearson)
- WJEC/Eduqas

Description

The qualifications covered in this release are regulated by Ofqual which publishes [conditions](#) that the exam boards it regulates have to meet. These conditions state that “an awarding organisation must have in place clear arrangements for Special Consideration to be given to learners in relation to qualifications which it makes available.” In this release, special consideration refers to a post-examination adjustment to a candidate’s mark or grade to reflect temporary illness or injury, or some other event outside their control, which has had, or is reasonably likely to have had, a material effect on their ability to take an assessment or demonstrate their level of attainment in an assessment.

In other cases, special consideration takes the form of an adjustment to the way an assessment is taken (which JCQ consider to be ‘access arrangements’). Data on access arrangements, which are applied before examinations, is not included in this report. Data on this category of adjustments is published by Ofqual in another publication ([Access Arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level](#)).

Special consideration requests for post-examination mark adjustments relate to a single request for a candidate sitting a specific unit or component in an exam. In this release, individual applications refer to an application from one candidate which can encompass either one or more components for that candidate. Group applications refer to an application which can encompass more than one candidate if they have been affected by the same circumstance. In this case, a group application can cover all the candidates and the potentially affected assessments.

Ofqual’s guide on [Regulating GCSEs, AS and A levels](#) highlights the types of post-examination special consideration which include:

- extra marks for a candidate whose exam performance is affected by temporary illness, injury or unforeseen incident
- awarding the qualification even though the student has not completed all the assessments that would normally be required.

Ofqual requires the exam boards to publish details of their arrangements for giving special consideration, which must include how a candidate qualifies for special consideration and what special consideration will be given. Ofqual does not prescribe the processes and procedures the exam boards use to make decisions about special consideration applications. This is because the circumstances of each application may be unique, and it is for exam boards to decide if and what consideration should be given under the circumstances, and in a fair and consistent way.

JCQ, a membership organisation of 8 providers of qualifications, including the four exam boards offering general qualifications in England, publishes [guidance and procedures on special consideration](#). There may be small changes year-on-year to this document that reflect the procedures in place for particular examination series.

Adjustments reported in this release may have been given to candidates who were present for an assessment but disadvantaged due to temporary injury, illness, or other unforeseen incident occurring immediately before or during the assessment period. JCQ's procedures allow for only relatively minor adjustments to a candidate's mark – up to 5% of the maximum mark of a question paper. Mark adjustment data was first available separately for England, Wales and Northern Ireland from 2016 onwards.

The [JCQ guidelines on special consideration](#) outline example cases where different tariffs may be used and they are summarised below:

- 5% – reserved for the most exceptional cases, such as recent death of a family member or terminal illness
- 4% – applies to problems that are very serious, such as a severe disease or injury
- 3% – recent traumatic experience or domestic crisis
- 2% – this includes candidates who have an illness at the time of assessment or extreme stress (not caused by the assessment) on the day of the examination
- 1% – this is for more minor problems such as noise during the examination or minor ailments

The 0% tariff is used in slightly different ways by each exam board. It may be used when an exam board approves the overall reason for the request, but not all instances the application covers. For example, they may consider that a recent traumatic event should only receive special consideration for those assessments taken within three weeks of the event and not for assessments taken after that time period. It may also be used as a means to capture other types of notification of situations that may have disadvantaged candidates.

Each application must be assessed on its merits, and the exam board's decision should be based on various factors, including the severity of the circumstances, the date of the exam in relation to the circumstances, and the nature of the assessment.

External influences

There are various factors over time which might have influenced the number of special consideration requests made for GCSEs and A level assessments given in this release:

- The number of requests in each subject will be influenced by the number of components available in respect of which requests could be made. There are likely to be more requests relating to bereavement, illness, and so on in specifications with more components. For example, some legacy A levels had more components than reformed A levels. Also, the balance of non-examined assessment and exams has changed in some subjects. Therefore comparisons between years may not be straightforward.
- Prior to 2017, affected candidates were required to have taken a minimum 40% of the assessment in order for either a mark adjustment or qualification award to be applied to the candidate's final grade. According to [JCQ guidance](#), from summer 2017, a student must have completed at least 25% of the assessment to be eligible for special consideration.
- The decline in the number of special consideration requests for A level and AS subjects could be explained by the decoupling of AS and A levels, as there has also been [a decline in AS entries](#).
- The overall number of entries declined compared to 2018, falling by approximately 2%, which may partly explain the small decrease in the number of special consideration requests.

Data source

The exam boards send Ofqual data on the number of requests for special consideration and their approvals. Ofqual collected data at candidate level and by subject for special consideration requests for the first time in 2017. Because of this, some data tables (such as individual and group applications) include data from 2017 only.

From 2016 onwards, the number of non-timetabled assessments (eg internal assessment and coursework) have also been reported along with the number of scripts marked.

Data for AS and A level have been combined in this release, unless otherwise specified.

To aid comparison with previous years we have presented the number of withdrawn requests in the total number of requests. Withdrawn requests refer to instances where exam boards withdraw the original application and ask the centre to reapply, at which point it is treated as a new application. Approximately 1% of the total number of requests were withdrawn in 2019, similar to 2018.

Limitations

There is potential for error in the information provided by exam boards, therefore

Ofqual cannot guarantee that the information received is correct. However, Ofqual conducts various quality assurance checks which are outlined in the 'quality assurance' section below.

For candidates that are 'absent with good reason', when a component has subcomponents exam boards count each subcomponent as being more than one application for special consideration. Pearson followed a different approach up to and including 2016, counting a component with subcomponents as being one application for special consideration. From 2017 onwards, Pearson's data has been counted in the same way as other exam boards.

AQA impose a cut-off date of 31st July for receipt of special consideration requests. Any requests received following this date are processed manually and are not currently included in the numbers published in this report because only the overall total (without any breakdown or further details) has been provided at present. As an example, AQA received 118 requests after 31st July in 2018 and are not currently included in the data tables and analysis used in this published report. In addition, prior to 2019, WJEC did not report requests received on or after results day, but have done so beginning this year. The numbers of special consideration requests received and approved by WJEC prior to 2019 may therefore be higher than reported.

Data returned by other exam boards include all requests made up to the data submission deadline.

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.

Revisions

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

Some revised data for previous years (2015 to 2018) has been published in this release. AQA and WJEC counts of the number of scripts and non-timetabled assessments for 2017 and 2018 were revised downwards after they removed endorsements and science practicals, which are not eligible for special consideration. OCR, following a system change that enabled them to submit figures that are more accurate, also revised these counts. Pearson provided more

precise information about the centres they serve in England resulting in small changes to the numbers of requests for special consideration that affected all data tables published as part of this report.

Confidentiality and rounding

To ensure confidentiality of the accompanying data, all figures for the number of special consideration requests are rounded to the nearest 5. Figures below 5 (1 to 4) appear as '0~' and '0' refers to cases where there are zero values relating to the number of requests, approvals and individual or group applications.

Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers in the report and to one decimal place in the accompanying data tables. As a result of rounded figures, the percentages (calculated on actual figures) shown in any tables may not necessarily add up to 100.

Status

These statistics are classified as official statistics.

Related publications

A number of other statistical releases and publications relate to this one:

- [Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\) collection](#)
- [Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment collection](#)
- Statistical Release: [Access Arrangements for GCSE and A Level: 2018/19 Academic Year](#): this statistical release published by Ofqual gives statistics on access arrangements in GCSE and A level for the 2018 to 2019 academic year.

For any related publications for qualifications offered in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland please contact the respective regulators - [Qualifications Wales](#), [CCEA](#) and the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#).

Useful links

- [Report and data tables](#) accompanying this release

- [Definitions](#) of important terms used in this release
- [Policies and procedures](#) that Ofqual follow for production of statistical releases

Feedback

We welcome your feedback on our publications. Should you have any comments on this statistical release and how to improve it to meet your needs please contact us at data.analytics@ofqual.gov.uk.

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