



Official Statistics

Background Information for Malpractice for GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2021 exam series

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Contents

1. Purpose
2. Geographical coverage
3. Description
4. External influences
5. Data source
6. Limitations
7. Quality assurance
8. Revisions
9. Confidentiality and rounding
10. Status
11. Related publications

Information about the statistics

1. Purpose

This release provides information on reported malpractice associated with GCSE, AS and A level qualifications during the summer 2021 exam series.

2. Geographical coverage

This report presents data on malpractice figures for GCSEs, AS and A levels in England.

3. Description

Four exam boards offer GCSE and AS and A level qualifications in England:

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

The qualifications covered in this release are regulated by Ofqual. Ofqual [publishes conditions that set out the requirements that the exam boards it regulates have to meet](#). These conditions state that an awarding organisation must take all reasonable steps to prevent the occurrence of any malpractice in the development, delivery and award of qualifications which it makes available or proposes to make available.

A breach of the exam boards' regulations that might undermine the integrity of an assessment may constitute malpractice. In ordinary circumstances this can include, for example, acts of plagiarism committed by students while completing non-exam assessment as well as failures by school or college staff to comply with exam board instructions.

The conditions require each exam board to investigate allegations or suspicions of malpractice and to manage the effect of any malpractice where they establish that malpractice has occurred. They must take steps to prevent reoccurrence and take action against those responsible that is proportionate to the gravity and scope of the occurrence.

In addition, the conditions require the exam boards to have up-to-date written procedures relating to the investigation of suspected malpractice. The exam boards are also required to keep under review centres' arrangements to prevent and investigate malpractice.

Exam boards investigate any instances of alleged or suspected malpractice in both examined and non-examined assessments, and teacher assessed grades (in years when exams have been cancelled), and take action with respect to the students, members of staff, and schools or colleges concerned to protect the integrity of the assessments, or to prevent reoccurrences of malpractice. [Schools and colleges are required to report all incidents of malpractice to the relevant exam boards](#) and cooperate with subsequent investigations. Each case of malpractice, whether reported by the school or college or identified by the exam board or external quality assurance processes, is considered and judged by each exam board on an individual basis in the light of all the information available, and

any sanction should be proportionate with the gravity of the malpractice as determined by the exam board.

The figures provided show the number of cases of malpractice for which penalties were applied. Penalties are reported at qualification level. Where penalties apply to multiple units within a qualification, these are only counted once.

3.1 Student malpractice

Exam boards may impose penalties on students found guilty of malpractice. The penalties for student malpractice vary depending on the type of offence. These penalties can include written warnings, loss of marks, and disqualification from units, components, or whole qualifications. An individual student can be penalised more than once in an exam series and by more than one exam board.

3.2 School or college staff malpractice

Exam boards may also impose penalties on school or college staff found guilty of malpractice. These penalties can include a written warning about the implications of repeating the offence, imposing special conditions on an individual's future involvement in exams and assessments, requiring specific training or mentoring as a condition of future involvement in exams, or suspending an individual from all involvement in delivering that exam board's exams and assessments for a set period. Exam boards can only impose sanctions related to a member of staff's involvement in the administration of their examinations; they cannot impose sanctions relating to a member of staff's employment. It is for centres to determine whether any wider sanction is appropriate (but that is not included in the figures reported here). In serious cases, we expect the exam board to consider whether to refer a case to the Teacher Regulation Authority to consider whether a teacher should be prohibited from teaching.

3.3 School or college malpractice

Instances of malpractice by schools or colleges can range from actions intended to give an unfair advantage to students in an exam or assessment to ignorance of, or inappropriate application of, the assessment regulations. Where there is evidence that malpractice is the result of a serious management failure, an exam board may apply sanctions against a whole department or the school or college.

4. External influences

4.1 Coronavirus (COVID-19)

The summer 2020 and summer 2021 exam series were cancelled as part of the government's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

In 2020, to enable as many students as possible to progress to the next stage of their education, training or employment, GCSE, AS and A level candidates instead received qualification results based on teacher judgement in the form of a centre assessment grade (CAG). Many of the more common instances of malpractice, such as taking unauthorised material into an examination, were not relevant in 2020 and therefore the overall number of incidences of malpractice was markedly reduced compared to previous years.

In 2021, although the summer exam series was cancelled, centres devised their own assessments to use as evidence to support awarding. The grading process could therefore be potentially undermined by malpractice in a similar way to a normal year. For example, bias or discrimination by centre staff, non-engagement with quality assurance processes by centres, or attempts by students to gain an unfair advantage during the centre's process could amount to malpractice, and centres were asked to report these occurrences to awarding organisations.

5. Data source

Exam boards submit data to Ofqual for GCSEs, AS and A levels they award. Any provider that does not return a complete set of data within the collection period is contacted to make sure the data is as complete as possible. The exam boards may revise their figures for an exam series in subsequent years.

6. Limitations

There is potential for error in the information provided by exam boards, therefore Ofqual cannot guarantee that the information received is correct. Ofqual compares the data over time and checks for systematic issues. Summary data are sent back to exam boards for checking and confirmation.

7. 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.

8. Revisions

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

The figures for summer 2020 published in this release are different from those published in the last release as some exam boards may have submitted revised 2020 figures. This was to capture the cases that were still in process when the data was originally reported.

9. Confidentiality and rounding

To ensure confidentiality of the accompanying data, all figures have been rounded to the nearest 5. If the value is less than 5 (1 to 4), it is represented as 0~ and 0 represents zero values.

Total values of rows or columns are calculated using unrounded figures; the sum of rounded figures may differ from the total reported.

All percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number, except where smaller magnitudes are needed for meaningful interpretation. As a result of rounded figures, the percentages (calculated on actual figures) shown in tables may not necessarily add up to 100.

10. Status

These statistics are classified as Official Statistics.

11. Related publications

A number of other statistical releases relate to this one, including:

- [Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\) collection](#)

- [Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment collection](#)

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 \(SQA\)](#).

12. Useful links

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

13. 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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