



**Office of Qualifications
and Examinations Regulation**

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15 June 2017

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Dear Headteacher

Summer 2017 exams

This letter sets out how we are working with exam boards to ensure that students sitting new GCSEs, AS and A levels this summer, along with new Applied Generals, are treated fairly.

Awarding in summer 2017

This summer sees a number of changes, in particular new GCSEs and new A levels in England. Our overriding aim is to make sure that students this year get a fair outcome and that those students in the 2017 cohort are not unfairly disadvantaged by being the first to sit new examinations.

As usual, exam boards will be using statistical predictions to set grade boundaries in the GCSE and A level awards across all subjects, but this year these predictions will play an even greater role in the first awards of new qualifications. That's because we know students [tend to perform less well in the first years of a new qualification](#), since teachers are less familiar with the new qualifications. Using statistical predictions compensates for this expected small drop in performance, so that students in the first cohort are not unfairly disadvantaged. Statistical predictions are also [the best method we have to align grade standards in a subject across exam boards](#), so it is no easier to get a particular grade with one board than with another.

Setting standards in new 9 to 1 GCSEs

The new GCSEs in English language, English literature and maths have a new grade scale, but that is not the only change. They have been designed to assess the more demanding curriculum set out by the Department for Education, and we have set new requirements about how they are assessed. In particular, they are linear exams with all exams taken at the end of the course.

We have already set out our approach to setting standards in the new GCSEs. Exam boards will use statistical predictions based on prior attainment at Key Stage 2. Where the cohort in 2017 is similar to that in 2016, we expect that:

- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve grade 7 and above as achieved grade A and above in 2016;
- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve grade 4 and above as achieved grade C and above in 2016; and
- the bottom of grade 1 will align with the bottom of grade G in 2016.

We have also published information about how [grade 9 will be set](#) and modelling of the likely proportions of students who will achieve each grade in GCSE English language and maths this year. It is worth remembering that grade 9 is not the same as A*. There will be fewer grade 9s than there are currently A*s so you should not compare the proportion of students achieving grade 9 this summer with those that achieved A* in previous years.

National Reference Tests

Some of you will have taken part in the first National Reference Tests earlier in the year. The 2017 tests will provide a benchmark for students' performance in English language and maths, and I am grateful to you for that. In future years, the evidence from the reference tests will be an additional source of evidence for exam boards to use when setting standards. However, we will be cautious in using this, and we do not expect to use reference test evidence until 2019 at the earliest.

Setting standards in new AS and A levels

There are 13 new A level subjects being awarded this summer. These new A levels are linear, so all exams have been taken this summer. The content has been updated and some of the assessment requirements have been changed. But the standard of an A level has not changed, nor has the grading scale. As for GCSE, exam boards will use information about the cohort's prior attainment to predict [likely proportions of students at certain grades – in this case A*, A and E](#). In general, our expectation is that a student who would have achieved, for example, a grade B at A level in previous years will achieve a grade B this year.

We know there are some concerns that if students [no longer receive feedback from taking AS exams at the end of year 12, that could result in lower overall results](#). The key point, however, is that if the entry is similar to last year then we expect A level results in those subjects to be similar to those in 2016. For those AS subjects that are new this year, exam boards will use the same approach as in 2016, guided by predictions based on GCSE prior attainment.

Question paper errors

As in previous years, we have seen a small number of exam errors this summer. We expect all papers to be error-free, but we also recognise that the production of question papers is a complex process which is subject to human error and so mistakes will happen from time to time. When errors are not identified before the exam, we expect the exam boards to do everything they can to minimise the impact on students. That is our immediate priority, and we are monitoring their actions closely. Once results are issued, we will look carefully at the reasons for the errors that occurred and take action

if appropriate.

Variability in results at school/college level

We know that it is normal for schools and colleges to see some variability in their own year-to-year results – either up or down. It can be due to many different factors, including differences in the ability mix of the students, different teaching approaches, changes in teaching staff or teaching time. We also know that when qualifications change, there is normally more variability in schools and college results, and this is what we expect for new qualifications this year. We will publish more information on this on results days, as we have done in [recent years](#).

A level modern foreign languages

We have recently published [research](#) on the effect of native speakers in A level French, German and Spanish. The evidence is not conclusive, but it does suggest that the proportion of native speakers taking these qualifications may have increased in recent years, as the overall entry has declined. Informed by this research, we believe there is a case for making a small upward adjustment to the predictions used to set grade A, and we will implement this for the summer 2017 A levels. We will provide more detail on this adjustment once exams are finished and before results days.

New Applied General qualifications

I also want to remind you that this summer sees the first awards of a number of new Applied General qualifications, which include external assessment for the first time. We have been working with the awarding bodies who are offering them to make sure that the standards set in these new externally-assessed units are appropriate.

Changes to post-results review services

We made changes to the way in which reviews of marking and moderation operate for GCSEs, AS and A levels last year, and these arrangements will continue. We also confirmed that we would pilot changes to our expectations for appeals of review of marking and moderation decisions. We have now reviewed the evidence from the pilot, and will shortly announce the arrangements that will be in place for appeals this summer.

Finally, I also wanted to say a little about the terrible attacks in Manchester and London. Some of those affected were in the middle of their exams, and others experienced the subsequent disruption to travel arrangements. Exam boards and schools already have contingency arrangements in place, and we understand that these have been implemented as appropriate – for example delaying the start time of exams, and applying for special consideration for those students unable to sit some of their exams. We continue to work to make sure that those students affected will receive a fair result.

I hope you find this information useful. We have also today published [statistics on provisional entries in England](#) this summer.

You may also find it helpful to sign-up to receive our [dedicated newsletters](#). I would also encourage you to continue to use the [resources](#) we have produced that explain the various reforms to assist us in raising awareness and understanding among your pupils, their parents, and others within your school and local community.

Do feel free to share this letter with your governing body, teaching staff and others in your school.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "S Collier". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator