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Office of Qualifications
and Examinations Regulation
Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

Telephone 0300 303 3344
Textphone 0300 303 3345
public.enquiries@ofqual.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofqual

Dear Responsible Officer

Applied Generals and Tech level qualifications: additional guidance on the interpretation of Department for Education technical guidance for performance table qualifications

This summer sees the first two-year cohort of students complete new qualifications that count in performance tables as Applied Generals or Tech levels. These qualifications have been developed to meet Department for Education requirements for at least 40% (Applied Generals) or 30% (Tech levels) of the qualification to be external assessment, which in practice often means timetabled exams. Depending on the size of the qualification, a student may take one or more externally assessed units (assessments). In light of the emerging picture, the Department wrote to you yesterday with additional advice and Ministers have asked us to provide guidance on the interpretation of the Department for Education's technical guidance for performance table qualifications.

In most of these qualifications, students must pass each of the externally-assessed units in order to be awarded a qualification grade at pass or higher. The consequence of these 'hurdles' is that a student who, for example, performs at distinction in three out of four units but just fails the fourth will fail the overall qualification. In contrast, a student who just passes all four units will likely pass the qualification (provided they have also passed the internally assessed units). We are concerned that this may impact the validity of grades issued and is not fair to students who narrowly miss passing one or more units, for several reasons.

First, it may be the case that a very good student fails one unit, but scores highly on all the others. They may have better overall knowledge, understanding and skills than a student who just passes every unit, but their overall qualification grade will not reflect that as they will fail the qualification.

Second, many of these students will be competing for university places with students taking A levels and other qualifications where there is no similar hurdle. This includes pre-existing versions of these qualifications which do not include external assessment. We want to avoid any unfair disadvantage to students with Applied

General or Tech level qualifications, simply because of the structure of the qualifications they chose to take.

Ahead of this summer's awards, I am therefore writing to encourage awarding organisations offering these qualifications to consider whether you might make some changes to your qualifications to provide a 'safety net' for those students who narrowly miss a pass on one or more externally-assessed units. This will create a more level playing field for students taking Level 3 qualifications in schools and colleges. In weighing up the need to make changes to their qualifications, awarding organisations will need to consider whether students must have demonstrated a minimum level of competence in each of the units/components, which would necessitate a hurdle being put in place.

It is clear from the different structure of Applied General and Tech level qualifications that the changes to be made might vary between awarding organisations, and not all awarding organisations will wish to make changes. Indeed, for some qualifications, such a change might be detrimental to validity. For others, it will improve the validity of grading.

I am not proposing to set out the detail of any changes that organisations may wish to make, but my colleagues stand ready to discuss that detail with each awarding organisation offering these qualifications.

I am also very aware that the summer will very soon be with us, and so it is important that any changes do not increase risks elsewhere in the system (for example in IT systems). It is also vital that schools, colleges, students and others are made aware of any changes as a matter of urgency.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Phil Beach'.

Phil Beach

Executive Director for Vocational and Technical Qualifications