

May 2018

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Dear Headteacher

Summer 2018 exams

We have now published [provisional entry statistics](#) for the summer 2018 GCSEs, AS and A levels. I wanted to take the opportunity to explain some of the changes in entries this year, and possible implications for results in August. I also want to set out how we are working with the exam boards to make sure that students taking GCSEs, AS, A levels or new Level 3 Applied Generals and Tech levels are treated fairly.

Reformed GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2018

This summer there are more reformed qualifications being awarded for the first time, and we include more detail on some of those below. As in previous years, our overriding aim is to make sure that students this year are treated fairly so they are not disadvantaged by being the first to sit these new qualifications.

As usual, exam boards will use statistical predictions to guide senior examiners who are setting grade boundaries in GCSE, AS and A level awards. In the first awards of new qualifications these predictions will play an even greater role, in order to carry forward the standards from the previous qualifications. And senior examiners will still be part of the decision-making, reviewing student work at the marks suggested by the statistics, to make sure it reflects the grade in question.

This is in line with our approach to all the first awards of reformed qualifications. [We know that students tend to perform less well in the first years of a new qualification](#), as teachers are less familiar with the content and style of assessment, and there tend to be fewer past papers and other resources. Using statistics compensates for this expected small drop in performance, so that students in the first cohort are not disadvantaged. Using statistics also provides the best method to align standards in a subject across different exam boards, so that it is no easier or harder to get a particular grade with one board than with another.

New 9 to 1 GCSEs

There are 20 new 9 to 1 GCSEs being awarded for the first time this summer. In all of these new GCSEs, statistics will be used to anchor the grade standards. Where the cohort taking each GCSE in 2018 is similar to that in 2017, we expect that:

- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve grade 7 and above as achieved grade A and above in 2017;
- broadly the same proportion of students will achieve grade 4 and above as achieved grade C and above in 2017; and
- the bottom of grade 1 will align with the bottom of grade G in 2017.

GCSE science suite

In the new science suite, GCSE science and GCSE additional science have been replaced with a new double award GCSE in combined science, with a 17-point double grade scale to reflect the size of the qualification. We have produced [films](#), [postcards](#) and [other resources](#) to explain how this scale works.

Entries for this new double award are higher than the total entries for science and additional science in 2017. Entries for the separate sciences (biology, chemistry and physics) are also up. Because the nature of the cohort taking these qualifications is different from previous years, it's likely that results this summer will look different, and schools should be careful in comparing previous results in science and additional science with 2018 results in combined science.

For schools who want an indication of the likely percentage of students at grade 4-4 in combined science, we suggest a reasonable indication would be the percentage of students that, in previous years have achieved a grade C in **both** science and additional science, whether they took them both in year 11 or one in year 10 and one in year 11. Similarly, the percentage of students who previously achieved a grade A in both would be a reasonable indicator of the likely percentage of students achieving a 7-7. But do bear in mind that if your school cohort has changed or if you have changed your approach to selecting students for separate sciences/combined science, that might mean your results are more variable compared to previous years.

AS and A levels

There are 12 new A levels being awarded for the first time this summer. As for the new A levels in 2017, exam boards will use statistical predictions to maintain standards from the outgoing qualifications. In general, a student who would previously have achieved a grade A in a subject should achieve a grade A in the new qualifications. A level entries are down slightly but generally stable.

A level maths

For reformed A levels, the first awards of most of the new qualifications have come two years after teaching started, reflecting the fact that A levels are normally two-year courses. The exception this summer is A level maths, where the first awards are taking place after only a year's teaching. We allowed this because we know that some students taking both maths and further maths take A level maths at the end of Year 12 and A level further maths at the end of Year 13. We wanted to make sure that provision was still available in the move to reformed qualifications. The entry for the new qualification is relatively small, and comprises mainly 17-year-olds, so the awarding will be based on the performance of 17-year-olds in recent years. There is [more information here](#).

A level French, German and Spanish

These A levels are new in summer 2018. In 2017 we made a small adjustment at grade A to take account of [the effect of native speakers](#) taking these qualifications. For 2018 we will carry forward that adjusted standard set in 2017.

AS

All but a handful of subjects are now reformed at AS. Entries have dropped again this year, which is as we expected given that students taking A levels are no longer required to take the AS as part of the A level. We have conducted research looking at whether this decline had any implications for maintaining standards in the new AS, and we intend to publish this in the summer.

New level 3 Applied Generals and Tech levels

As well as new A levels and GCSEs, there are first awards this summer for a number of qualifications that count for performance tables as Applied Generals and Tech levels, including BTECs and Cambridge Technicals. As part of our monitoring over the summer, we are keeping a close eye on the delivery and awarding of these new qualifications.

The new versions of these qualifications include externally assessed units, which are often written exams. In the previous versions of these qualifications, some of which are still available, units were all internally assessed and so students did not claim their qualification until they had passed the required number of units. In these new

qualifications, students will not get the results of the externally assessed units until August, and if they have not achieved sufficient marks on those units, they could fail the qualification. This difference means schools and colleges should not compare pass rates on the new and old versions.

There are also some differences in the way that the unit results are aggregated to give a qualification result. This, together with the introduction of external assessment, is likely to mean a drop in the percentage of students achieving the very high grades.

We know that many students taking these qualifications will be applying to higher education this summer. We have been working with UCAS to help higher education institutions understand the differences between the new and old versions of these qualifications.

Variability in results at school/college level

We know that it is normal for schools and colleges to see some variation in their year-on-year results, either up or down. This can be due to many different factors including the ability mix of the students, different teaching approaches, changes to the qualification itself, changes in teaching staff, or the amount of time allocated to teaching a particular subject. Generally, when qualifications change, we expect that there might be more variation in school and college results. However, last summer we saw normal levels of variation, including in those subjects that were reformed. We concluded that schools and colleges had coped well with the changes. But it is still possible that some schools and colleges could see more variation than usual this year. We will publish more information about this on results days in August.

Grade boundaries

Finally, a word about grade boundaries. As we have [explained previously](#), these are not set until after the papers have been marked, because it's only then that exam boards will know how difficult students have found those papers. We have seen many people trying to predict where the grade boundaries will be for new qualifications. Please treat all such predictions with caution.

Last summer comments were made about grade boundaries in GCSE maths, particularly the position of the grade 4 boundary on the higher tier. Remember that this is a [consequence of the design of the qualifications](#), as grade 4 is the lowest grade that the paper targets.

Keeping in touch

You may 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 stroke underneath.

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator, Ofqual