

13 July 2018

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Dear

## **Setting and maintaining standards in GCSEs, AS and A levels and Applied Generals/Tech levels in summer 2018**

I am writing to confirm our expectations in relation to setting standards in GCSEs, AS and A levels and Applied Generals/Tech levels in England in summer 2018. This approach has been agreed by the Ofqual Board, is set out in qualification-specific requirements, and is in line with our approach in recent years. The detail of these requirements for summer 2018 is set out in the Data Exchange Procedures.<sup>1</sup>

You and your colleagues will be well aware of the changes to qualifications taken this summer. Our priority, as in recent years, is the fair awarding of qualifications so that the cohort in 2018 is not advantaged or disadvantaged. A key aspect of this is aligning grade standards between exam boards, so that it is no easier to achieve a particular grade with one board than with another.

### **GCSEs graded A\*-G**

Where GCSEs are not changing this summer, we expect you to maintain grade standards using predictions based on prior attainment at Key Stage 2. Where appropriate, you should also take account of any trends of severity or leniency identified by inter-board screening.

### **GCSEs graded 9-1**

Where the new 9-1 GCSEs are awarded for the first time, the Ofqual Board agreed that awarding would be based primarily on statistical predictions, and that predictions would be used to ensure alignment as follows:

- between the new 4/3 boundary and the previous C/D boundary,
- between the new 7/6 boundary and the previous A/B boundary, and
- between the new 1/U boundary and the previous G/U boundary.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-exchange-procedures-for-a-level-gcse-level-1-and-2-certificates>

The Board agreed that other boundaries would be set arithmetically, with the exception of grade 9. In 2016, the Board confirmed that grade 9 would be set in the first year using the 'tailored approach'.

The Ofqual Board also agreed that in the second year of the new 9-1 GCSEs awarding would be based primarily on statistical predictions. This includes the awarding of grade 9, which would be set based on statistical predictions that carry forward the grade 9 standard set in the first awards.

We have set out principles for awarding new GCSEs in appendix 3 of the data exchange procedures. Our expectation is that you will follow these principles when awarding new GCSEs this summer.

## **AS**

The provisional entry data<sup>2</sup> shows that AS entries have dropped again in all of the reformed subjects. As a result, predictions based on prior attainment may be less reliable, for two reasons. First, if the students this year are not representative of students in previous years in ways other than prior attainment, we might have less confidence in the predictions. Second, the increasingly lower overall volumes will likely mean that predictions for individual specifications will, in some cases, be based on relatively small numbers. Our view is that predictions provide exam boards with a common starting point, but, for the reasons outlined above, examiner judgement will be an important source of evidence in maintaining standards in AS specifications given the ongoing changes in entry.

## **A levels**

Where A levels are not changing, we expect that you will continue to maintain grade standards using predictions based on prior attainment at GCSE.

Where the new A levels are awarded for the first time, the Ofqual Board agreed that awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions derived from GCSE prior attainment, as now. The Ofqual Board also agreed that in the second year of the new A levels, awarding should be based primarily on statistical predictions.

We have set out principles for awarding new A levels in appendix 3 of the data exchange procedures. Our expectation is that you will follow these principles when awarding new A levels this summer.

## **Summer 2018 awarding risks**

As you are aware, under General Condition A6 you have a duty to take all reasonable steps to identify the risk of the occurrence of any incident which could have an Adverse Effect. Where such risks are identified, you are required to prevent or, where it cannot be prevented, to reduce the risk of that incident occurring and to prevent or mitigate any Adverse Effect that the incident could have. We expect that

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2018-exam-series>

you will use your own risk assessment to identify areas of risk to awarding in summer 2018 and to notify us as appropriate.

### **Summer 2018 data exchange procedures**

As in previous years, we have worked with your technical colleagues to develop the data exchange procedures and templates, which have now been published as a Regulatory Document (under General Condition B7).

### **Applied General and Tech Level qualifications**

This summer will see more awards of externally-assessed units in the reformed Applied General and Tech Level qualifications introduced for first teaching from September 2016. A sizeable cohort of students will also complete their courses and will use these qualifications to progress to further study or employment.

When setting standards in the externally assessed units this summer, our expectation is that you will maintain unit-level standards set in previous series. Setting different standards for units that have already been awarded would raise issues related to the comparability of grading standards over time and risks undermining public confidence in these qualifications. In order to maintain standards, our expectations is that archive material for these units (or from similar level 3 qualifications) from previous series will be used to guide awarders' professional judgements, and that you will also retain material from this spring/summer for future reference. Where available, we expect you to consider technical information on assessment functioning and on expected outcomes where the cohort is stable compared to previous series.

Because of the sawtooth effect, the quality of student work in the first series of these assessments is likely to be a little weaker than might be expected after the qualifications have been taught for a number of years, as a result of schools and colleges still getting used to the assessment requirements. Awarding of recently introduced external assessments will have to involve a balance between being fair to students in the first awards of new assessments and the need to ensure that public confidence is not undermined by grade boundaries that are indefensibly low.

We will be monitoring the awards of Applied General and Tech Level qualifications. To this purpose we will collect data at both unit and qualification level ahead of results in order to gain visibility of the national picture and gauge the impact of the recent policy changes in this sector.

Yours sincerely,



Cath Jadhav  
Director, Standards and Comparability