

Summer 2018 GCSE, AS and A level exams

A summary of our monitoring



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This document summarises our monitoring of GCSE, AS and A level awarding in summer 2018, provides a summary of out of tolerance awards and highlights some delivery related actions.

1. Maintaining standards

Our aim in monitoring the GCSE, AS and A level awards is to achieve a level playing field for students, so that it is no easier or harder to achieve a grade in a subject with one exam board than another. To do this, we agree with exam boards the basis for statistical predictions using prior attainment for the cohort: AS and A level predictions are based on GCSE prior attainment, and GCSE predictions are based on key stage 2 prior attainment. We then monitor how closely the exam boards' results are to those predictions.

For reformed qualifications being awarded for the first or second time (GCSE, AS and A level qualifications first awarded in 2017 or 2018), we agreed that exam boards should meet the predictions as closely as possible. It was possible for exam boards to set boundaries that led to an award away from prediction, but they had to provide supporting evidence to do so.

For legacy and non-reformed qualifications, as in previous years, we set reporting tolerances around the predictions. This summer, we also set tolerances around the predictions for reformed qualifications that were being awarded for the third time – those AS qualifications that were first awarded in 2016. For all of these qualifications, exam boards were required to provide additional evidence to support any awards that were out of tolerance. Section 4 of this report provides further details of qualifications where the award was out of tolerance or not as close as possible to prediction.

We pay close attention to the way in which different exam boards' grade standards in a subject are aligned. Ahead of results being issued, we meet with the exam boards to review the emerging results. This enables us to judge whether standards have been maintained at overall subject level. Where we believe that exam boards' grade standards are not aligned within a subject, we have the power to require them to bring their award into line with other boards.

2. Setting standards in reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications

In England, new GCSE, AS and A level qualifications were awarded in most subjects¹ this summer.² For the reformed qualifications, we agreed with exam boards that they should carry forward standards from the legacy qualifications by using statistical predictions. Our intention was that, in general, a student who would have achieved a particular grade on the previous qualification would achieve the same or equivalent grade on the reformed qualification.

Statistical predictions are the most effective way to carry forward grade standards to new qualifications, so that students in the first cohort of a new qualification are not unfairly disadvantaged. In the first and second awards of the reformed qualifications, senior examiners were asked to check whether the quality of student work at the grade boundaries suggested by the statistical predictions was acceptable (at grade A or E for AS and A level, and at grade 7, 4 and 1 for GCSE). To ensure that exam boards were following these requirements in the same way, we worked with exam boards to develop a set of principles, with which they all agreed.³ From the third year onwards, senior examiners will continue to have a role in judging the quality of student's work, but reporting tolerances will be applied to the outcomes compared to the statistical predictions.

3. Setting standards in GCSE combined science double award

The content of GCSE combined science is the same size as two GCSEs and so students will get a double grade, from 9-9, 9-8, 8-8 through to 1-1. It is a tiered qualification.

Schools and colleges had to decide whether to enter each student for the higher tier (targeted at grades 9-9 to 4-4) or the foundation tier (targeted at grades 5-5 to 1-1). When deciding for which tier to enter students, schools and colleges should choose the one which will give a student scope to reach their full potential but avoids the risk of their result being unclassified (U) if they enter higher tier and fall below the standard required for a 4-4.

Entry decisions will be most difficult in the first year of a qualification. Decisions will have been particularly difficult for combined science, because of the structural

¹ For subjects, see: [Get the facts: GCSE and AS and A level reform.](#)

² There were also new qualifications awarded in Wales and Northern Ireland this summer. However, we do not regulate these new qualifications so they are not part of our monitoring.

³ See Appendix 3 of the [data exchange procedures.](#)

changes - including the removal of untiered controlled assessment and the introduction of the double award.

We allow a 'safety net' grade of 4-3 for students whose mark falls just below the 4-4 boundary. During the awarding period exam boards reported to us that, while they were confident in standards set at 4-4, more higher tier students than expected would receive an unclassified result. Exam boards believed that some of these students should have been entered for the foundation tier; their performance was in line with that required for a 3-3, an award available to students entered for the foundation tier.

To prevent such students receiving an unclassified result we allowed exam boards to use grade 3-3 on the higher tier this summer. [We wrote to the boards to explain the position](#). Senior examiners in each of the exam boards reviewed the work of students and confirmed that it was of an appropriate standard before deciding to award a 3-3 to any students entered for the higher tier

4. Monitoring the quality of delivery

Exam boards must notify us of events that could have an impact on the effective delivery of valid and reliable assessments, such as question paper errors, concerns about serious malpractice and breaches to the security of exam materials. We will consider the summer 2018 notifications in our report on the summer series that we will publish in December 2018.

5. Quality of marking

We have an on-going programme of work to monitor the quality of exam boards' marking. We expect exam boards to use our findings to bring about improvements where needed. In response to our concerns about OCR's progress in making improvements, [OCR gave us an undertaking in June 2018](#) in which it set out its commitment to enhance the way it secured the quality of its marking this summer

6. Reviews of marking

Schools and colleges can ask an exam board to review a student's mark if they believe the mark reflects a marking error. Exam boards must comply with our rules, which require them to correct any marking error, however large or small, and only to change a mark on review to correct an error.

In 2017, our analyses of initial marking and reviews of marking data provided clear evidence that not all exam boards had fully complied with our rules on reviews of marking. Some marks had been changed on review where there was no error. We have been clear with the exams boards that this must not be repeated this year. [AQA gave us an undertaking in December 2017](#) in which it confirmed its commitment to comply with our rules. In response to our concerns with OCR's progress towards

ensuring compliance with our rules, [it gave us an undertaking in July 2018](#) in which it set out its commitment to enhance the way it monitored its reviewers this summer.

7. Summary of 2018 awarding outcomes

Exam boards report data to us from each of their awards.⁴ For legacy and unreformed qualifications, and reformed AS qualifications first awarded in 2016, the outcomes of each award were evaluated compared to a given reporting tolerance. Where the actual and predicted outcomes for a specification differ beyond this reporting tolerance (that depends on entry size), the exam board must inform us and provide additional information to support an out of tolerance award.

The reporting tolerances for legacy and unreformed qualifications, and reformed AS qualifications first awarded in 2016, are as follows.

Matched entry ⁵	Reporting tolerance
500 or less	Not applicable
501 – 1,000	±3%
1,001 – 3,000	±2%
3,001 or more	±1%

The above reporting tolerances applied to the following grades:

- unreformed/legacy GCSE – grades A and C
- unreformed/legacy AS – grade A
- reformed AS first awarded in 2016 – grade A
- unreformed/legacy A level – grade A

For A*, the allowable tolerance between predicted and actual outcomes for unreformed and legacy qualifications is ± 2%.⁶

⁴ More detail on the reporting procedures and tolerances can be found in our [2018 data exchange procedures document](#).

⁵ Matched entry refers to the number of students who can be matched to their prior attainment (GCSE or key stage 2).

⁶ For qualifications where there were more than 500 matched entries and more than 100 of the matched entries obtained grade A cumulative overall.

For reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications being awarded for the first or second time (qualifications first awarded in 2017 and 2018), we agreed that exam boards should meet the prediction as closely as possible. Where the matched entry was greater than 500 and outcomes were not as close as possible to the prediction, the exam board had to inform us and provide additional information to support the award.

This applied to the following grades:

- GCSE – grades 9, 7 and 4
- AS – grades A and E
- A level – grades A*, A and E

This summary includes only AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC/Eduqas awards.⁷ Prior to 2016, we have also reported out of tolerance awards from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). However, we do not regulate GCSEs, AS or A levels awarded in Northern Ireland and CCEA no longer offers its qualifications to students in England.

For comparison, a summary of out of tolerance awards for 2017 is reported in the Appendix.

Figure 1 shows the number of awards reviewed against a prediction in 2017 and 2018, and the number outside of reporting tolerances or not as close as possible to prediction. In total, data for 666 awards were reviewed in 2018 (201 GCSE awards, 246 AS awards, and 219 A level awards), and of these, 347 were reviewed against a prediction.

⁷ As we do not regulate reformed GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in Wales, these qualifications are not part of our monitoring.

Summer 2018 GCSE, AS and A level exams: a summary of our monitoring

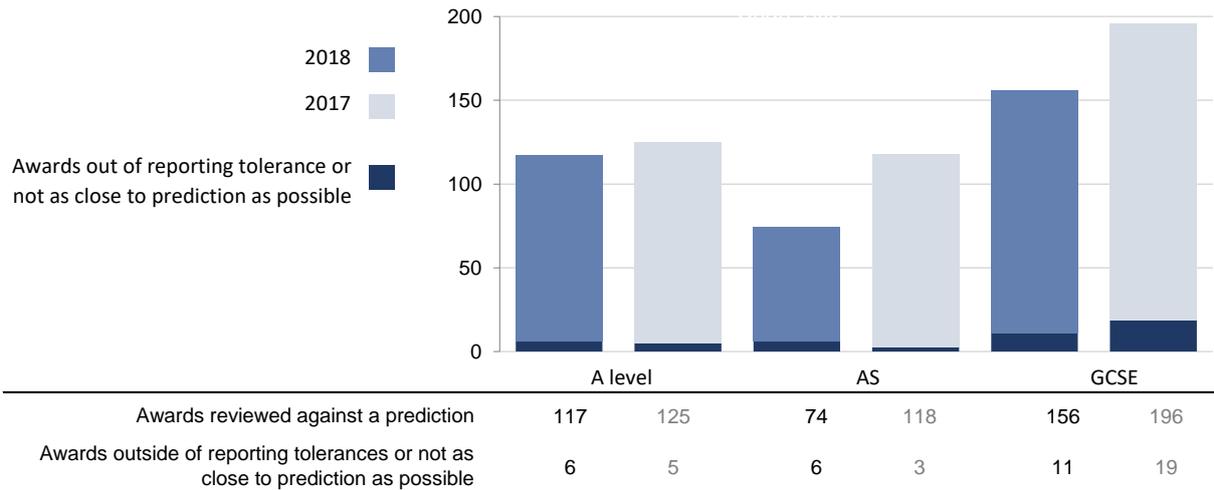


Figure 1. Summary of awards reviewed against prediction in 2017 and 2018

Table 1 shows the out of tolerance awards for legacy and unreformed A level qualifications at grades A* and A, and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for the out of tolerance award, according to the reasons outlined as part of the summer 2018 data exchange procedures.⁸

In summary, the classifications are as follows:

- technical – a technical reason for being out of tolerance, such as where it is not possible to meet predictions for all grades in a qualification
- aligning standards – where exam boards have evidence to support an adjustment to standards
- cohort – where the cohort for a qualification is different from previous years in a way that might make predictions less reliable
- other – any other relevant factor

⁸ See: [2018 data exchange procedures](#).

Table 1. A level (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome		Rationale
		A*	A	
Health and social care	2%	-	Above	Technical

Table 2 shows the reformed A level awards that were not as close to prediction as possible at grades A*, A and E, and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award. Reformed A level qualifications were awarded in 25 subjects this summer.

Table 2. A level (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction

	Grade			Rationale
	A*	A	E	
Biology	Above	Above	Above	Cohort
Computer science	-	-	Below	Cohort
Latin	-	-	Below	Cohort
Music	-	Below	Above	Cohort
Music	-		Below	Cohort

Table 3 shows the out of tolerance awards for legacy and unreformed AS qualifications at grade A, and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for the out of tolerance award.

Table 3. AS (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome		Rationale
		A		
Further mathematics	2%		Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%		Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%		Below	Cohort
Mathematics	1%		Below	Technical

Table 4 shows the reformed AS subjects (first or second awards) that were not as close to prediction as possible at grades A and E and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award. For reformed AS qualifications first awarded in 2016, outcomes were reviewed against reporting tolerances at grade A. There were no out of tolerance awards for these qualifications.

Table 4. AS (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction

	Grade		Rationale
	A	E	
Physical education	-	Above	Technical
Religious studies	Below	Below	Cohort

Table 5 shows the out of tolerance awards for legacy and unreformed GCSE qualifications at grades A*, A and C, and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for the out of tolerance award.

Table 5. GCSE (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome			Rationale
		A*	A	C	
Applied business	3%	-	-	Above	Technical
Arabic	3% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	-	Cohort
Chinese	3% (2% at A*)	Below	-	-	Technical
Design and technology: electronic products	2%	-	-	Above	Cohort
Design and technology: product design	2%	-	Above	Above	Cohort
Design and technology: textiles technology	3%	-	Above	-	Cohort
ICT	1% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	Above	Cohort
Turkish	3%	Above	-	-	Technical

Reformed GCSE qualifications were awarded in 23 subjects this summer. Table 6 shows the reformed GCSE awards that were not as close to prediction as possible and our classification of the evidence provided by the respective exam board for each award.

Table 6. GCSE (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction

	Grade			Rationale
	9	7	4	
Combined science	Below	Below	Below	Cohort
Mathematics	-	Below	Below	Cohort
Religious studies (short course)	-	-	Above	Cohort

Appendix – Awarding outcomes in summer 2017

Table 7. A level (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards - 2017

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome		Rationale
		A*	A	
German	3%	-	Above	Cohort
Mathematics	1% (2% at A*)	Above	-	Technical

Table 8. A level (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction - 2017

	Grade			Rationale
	A*	A	E	
Chemistry	-	-	Below	Cohort
Computer science	-	-	Below	Cohort
English language	-	-	Below	Cohort

Table 9. AS (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards - 2017

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome	Rationale
		A	
Religious studies	2%	Below	Cohort

Table 10. AS (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction - 2017

	Grade		Rationale
	A	E	
Art and design	Below	-	Technical
Art and design	-	Above	Cohort

Table 11. GCSE (unreformed and legacy) out of tolerance awards - 2017

	Reporting tolerance	Difference between actual and predicted outcome			Rationale
		A*	A	C	
Additional science	1% (2% at A*)	-	-	Below	Cohort
Arabic	3% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	-	Cohort
Classical civilisation	3% (2% at A*)	Above	Above	-	Cohort
Computer science	1% (2% at A*)	-	Below	-	Cohort
D&T electronic products	2%	-	Above	Above	Cohort
D&T product design	2%	-	-	Above	Cohort
Engineering	1% (2% at A*)	-	-	Above	Aligning standards
Further add science A	3% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	Below	Technical
Home economics: child dev	2%	-	Above	Above	Cohort
Home economics: food	2%	-	-	Above	Cohort
Latin	2%	Above	Above	Above	Aligning standards
Media studies	1% (2% at A*)	-	-	Above	Cohort
Performing arts	2%	Above	-	-	Technical
Religious studies A	1% (2% at A*)	Above	Above	Above	Technical
Science A	2%	-	-	Below	Cohort
Urdu	3% (2% at A*)	Above	-	-	Technical
Additional science	1% (2% at A*)	-	-	Below	Cohort
Arabic	3% (2% at A*)	Below	Below	-	Cohort

Table 12. GCSE (reformed) awards not as close as possible to prediction - 2017

	Grade			Rationale
	9	7	4	
Mathematics	-	-	Below	Cohort

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