

Special consideration in GCSE, AS and A level: summer 2018 exam series

Background information accompanying the statistical release

6 December 2018

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Information about the statistics

Purpose

This release presents figures on the number of special consideration requests for GCSE, AS and A levels submitted by schools and colleges to exam boards for exams and non-timetabled assessments sat in summer 2018.

Geographical coverage

This report presents data on special consideration requests made in England. Five exam boards offer GCSE and GCE qualifications in England:

- AQA Education (AQA)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA), until 2015
- Oxford Cambridge and RSA Examinations (OCR)
- Pearson Education Ltd. (Pearson)
- WJEC-CBAC Ltd. (WJEC)

Description

The qualifications covered in this release are regulated by Ofqual which publishes [conditions](#) that the exam boards it regulates have to meet. These conditions state that “an awarding organisation must have in place clear arrangements for Special Consideration to be given to learners in relation to qualifications which it makes available.” In this release, special consideration refers to a post-examination adjustment to a candidate’s mark or grade to reflect temporary illness or injury, or some other event outside their control, which has had, or is reasonably likely to have had, a material effect on their ability to take an assessment or demonstrate their level of attainment in an assessment.

Special consideration requests relate to a single request for a candidate sitting a specific unit or component in an exam. In this release, individual applications refer to an application from one candidate which can encompass either one or more units for that candidate. Group applications refer to an application which can encompass more than one candidate if they have been affected by the same circumstance. In this case a group application can cover all the candidates and the potentially affected assessments.

Ofqual’s guide on [Regulating GCSEs, AS and A levels](#) highlights the types of special consideration which include:

- extra marks for a candidate whose exam performance is affected by temporary illness, injury or unforeseen incident

- awarding the qualification even though the student has not completed all the assessments that would normally be required.

In other cases, special consideration takes the form of an adjustment to the way an assessment is taken (which JCQ consider to be ‘access arrangements’). Data on access arrangements, which are applied before examinations, is not included in this report. Data on this category of adjustments is published by Ofqual in another publication ([Access Arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level](#)).

Ofqual requires the exam boards to publish details of their arrangements for giving special consideration, which must include how a candidate qualifies for special consideration and what special consideration will be given. Ofqual does not prescribe the processes and procedures the exam boards use to make decisions about special consideration applications. This is because the circumstances of each application may be unique, and it is for exam boards to decide if and what consideration should be given under the circumstances, and in a fair and consistent way.

JCQ, a membership organisation of 8 providers of qualifications, including the four exam boards offering general qualifications, publishes [guidance and procedures on special consideration](#). There may be small changes year-on-year to this document that reflect the procedures in place for particular examination series.

Adjustments reported on in this release may be given to candidates who were present for an assessment but disadvantaged due to temporary injury, illness, indisposition or other unforeseen incident occurring immediately before or during the assessment period. JCQ’s procedures allow for only relatively minor adjustments to a candidate’s mark – up to 5% of the maximum mark of a question paper. Mark adjustment data was first available separately for England, Wales and Northern Ireland from 2016 onwards.

Examples of cases where percentage adjustments can be made are highlighted below:

- 5% – reserved for the most exceptional cases, such as recent death of a family member or terminal illness
- 4% – applies to problems that are very serious, such as a severe disease or injury
- 3% – more cases tend to fall under this and can include recent traumatic experience or domestic crisis
- 2% – this includes candidates who have an illness at the time of assessment or extreme stress on the day of the examination

- 1% – this is for more minor problems such as noise during the examination or minor ailments
- 0% – the application was reviewed, but the addition of marks was deemed inappropriate. This might happen when an exam board approves the overall reason for the request, but not all instances of candidates or their assessments within it. For example, they may consider that a recent traumatic event should only receive special consideration for those assessments taken within three weeks of the event and not for assessments taken after that time period.

Each application must be assessed on its merits, and the exam board's decision should be based on various factors, including the severity of the circumstances, the date of the exam in relation to the circumstances, and the nature of the assessment.

External influences

There are various factors over time which might have influenced the number of special consideration requests made for GCSEs and A level assessments given in this release:

- The number of GCSE English literature and English language entries increased in 2017 and GCSE English literature entries increased in 2018, as other level 1/2 qualifications in these subjects were no longer included in school league tables from summer 2017 onwards (see [Ofqual's statistical release on summer 2017 entries](#)). Changes to performance tables also mean that these are particularly high stakes qualifications. Because of this, schools and colleges might be more likely to apply for special consideration if there are extenuating circumstances.
- Some reformed GCSEs comprise more exams than the previous qualifications, which could mean that there are more exams potentially affected and in respect of which candidates might seek special consideration. This might explain an increase in the number of special consideration requests. There are also higher numbers entering these subjects.
- The number of requests in each subject will be influenced by the number of components available in respect of which requests could be made. There are likely to be more requests in specifications with more components. For example, some legacy A levels have more components than reformed A levels. Also, the balance of non-examined assessment and exams has changed in some A levels. Therefore comparisons between years may not be straightforward.

- Prior to 2017, affected candidates were required to have taken a minimum 40% of the assessment in order for either a mark adjustment or qualification award to be applied to the candidate's final grade. According to [JCO guidance](#), from summer 2017, a student must have completed at least 25% of the assessment to be eligible for special consideration. Due to the reforms, there are fewer subjects with coursework which means there are fewer opportunities to have completed the minimum amount of assessment required.
- Since 2014, candidates have taken all their exams at the end of the course, with no opportunity to take components or resit components at other times in the year. It is possible that this in part explains the increase in requests where there are extenuating circumstances from 2014 onwards as there are fewer opportunities in the year to take exams for individual units.
- The decline in the number of special consideration requests for A level and AS subjects could be explained by the decoupling of AS and A levels, as there has also been [a decline in AS entries](#).

Data source

The exam boards send Ofqual data on the number of requests for special consideration and their approvals. Last year (2017) was the first year Ofqual collected data at candidate level and by subject for special consideration requests. Because of this, candidate level data tables include data for 2017 and 2018 only. Data on individual and group applications was also collected for the first time in 2017.

From 2016 onwards, the number of non-timetabled assessments have also been reported along with the number of scripts marked.

Data for AS and A level have been combined in this release.

To aid comparison with previous years we have kept withdrawn requests in the total number of requests. Withdrawn requests refer to requests that were withdrawn, which are instances where exam boards withdraw the original application and ask the centre to reapply, at which point it is treated as a new application. In 2018, only 1% of the total number of requests were withdrawn.

Limitations

There is potential for error in the information provided by exam boards, therefore Ofqual cannot guarantee that the information received is correct. However, Ofqual conducts various quality assurance checks which are outlined in the 'quality assurance' section below.

For candidates that are 'absent with good reason', when a unit has subcomponents exam boards count each subcomponent as being more than one application for special consideration. Pearson followed a different approach up to and including 2016, counting a unit with subcomponents as being one application for special consideration. From 2017 onwards, Pearson's data has been counted in the same way as other exam boards.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance procedures are carried out as explained in the [Quality Assurance Framework for Statistical Publications](#) published by Ofqual to ensure the accuracy of the data and to challenge or question it, where necessary. Publication may be deferred if the statistics are not considered fit for purpose.

Revisions

Once published, data on special considerations are not usually subject to revision, although subsequent releases may be revised to insert late data or to correct an error.

Some revised data for previous years (2014 to 2017) has been published in this release. The revisions were submitted by CCEA to correctly classify centres in the Channel Islands (previously included in England data by error).

The GCSE charts on page 5 and data table 7 have been updated to show the number of special consideration requests (for what was previously reported as 'all science subjects') broken down by separate sciences and combined science. This was done to reflect a recent resubmission of data by one exam board (where requests in 2017 were miscategorised as separate sciences and have now been categorised as science and additional science).

Confidentiality and rounding

To ensure confidentiality of the accompanying data, all figures for the number of special consideration requests are rounded to the nearest 5. Figures below 5 (1 to 4) appear as '0~' and '0' refers to cases where there are zero values relating to the number of requests, approvals and individual or group applications.

As a result of rounded figures, the percentages (calculated on actual figures) shown in any tables may not necessarily add up to 100. Percentages have been rounded up to one decimal place in the report and accompanying data tables.

Status

These statistics are classified as official statistics.

Related publications

A number of other statistical releases and publications relate to this one:

- [Statistics: GCSEs \(key stage 4\) collection](#)
- [Statistics: 16 to 19 attainment collection](#)
- Statistical Release: [Access Arrangements for GCSE and A Level: 2017/18 Academic Year](#): this statistical release published by Ofqual gives statistics on access arrangements in GCSE and A level for the 2017 to 2018 academic year.

For any related publications for qualifications offered in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland please contact the respective regulators - [Qualifications Wales](#), [CCEA](#) and the [Scottish Qualifications Authority \(SQA\)](#).

Useful links

- [Report and data tables](#) accompanying this release
- [Definitions](#) of important terms used in this release
- [Policies and procedures](#) that Ofqual follow for production of statistical releases

Feedback

We welcome your feedback on our publications. Should you have any comments on this statistical release and how to improve it to meet your needs please contact us at statistics@ofqual.gov.uk.



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