

**ofqual**

GCSE, AS & A level  
Summer Report

**2018**



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# Introduction

Ofqual monitors exam boards' preparation for, and delivery of, summer exams in GCSE, AS and A level (GCE) qualifications.

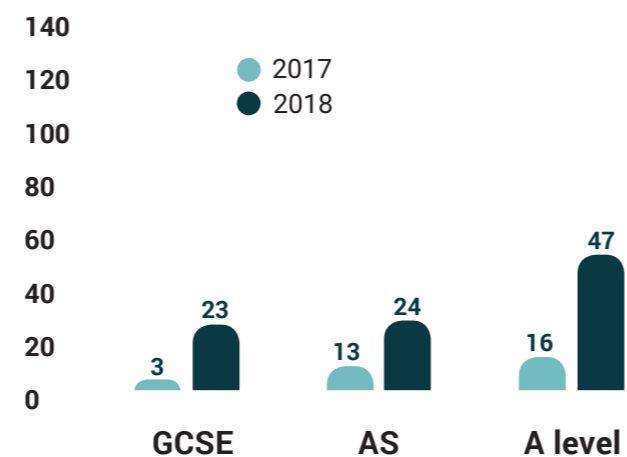
These are provided to schools and colleges in England by 4 exam boards: AQA, OCR, Pearson and WJEC.

Our priorities during any exam series are that:

- exams are fit for purpose and delivered to plan
- results are issued on time and are accurate so that users can rely on them
- standards are maintained in each qualification between exam boards and over time

The summer exam series is by far the largest of any single exam series we regulate. And this year was the most significant year of the GCSE, AS and A level reform programme.

## Number of reformed subjects awarded for first time



Overall, we found that exams were carefully planned, effectively managed and successfully delivered. Examination outcomes have remained stable in recent years, and this trend continued in 2018. We also found that the variability in results within schools and colleges was similar to previous years<sup>1</sup>, suggesting that teachers and students have responded well to the reforms.

During the exam period, each board is responsible for the effective management of any issues that arise, and we intervene only where we feel it is necessary to protect standards, public confidence or to mitigate any impact on students. After the exams are finished and results are published, we analyse the issues which occurred and evaluate the cause, impact and how effectively they were managed by each exam board. We decide if any regulatory response is necessary. We follow up specific incidents with individual exam boards, consider the focus of our ongoing monitoring and, where necessary, conduct additional work to understand how to minimise the likelihood of particular types of issues from reoccurring.

This report includes a summary of the key issues which arose in the lead up to, during and immediately after the 2018 summer exam series, and the actions we took. In previous years we have reported on other general qualifications, such as Level 1/2 Certificates. However, as entries for these qualifications fall, and some cease to be regulated, so too do the number and scale of events. This report therefore focusses only on GCSE, AS and A level qualifications offered in England.

The delivery of the exam series can be divided into 5 phases: exam planning; exam administration; marking; setting standards; and post results. We have structured this report to reflect those phases.

## Delivery of summer 2018 exam series

In early 2018, we met with each of the 4 GCSE and A level exam boards to assess their readiness for the 2018 summer exam series. We reviewed the extent to which they had identified and were managing the risks to the safe delivery of the series. We looked, in particular, at the steps they had taken to prevent any issues which occurred in 2017 being repeated. Following these reviews, we presented our observations to each exam board for their consideration, although we identified no serious concerns.

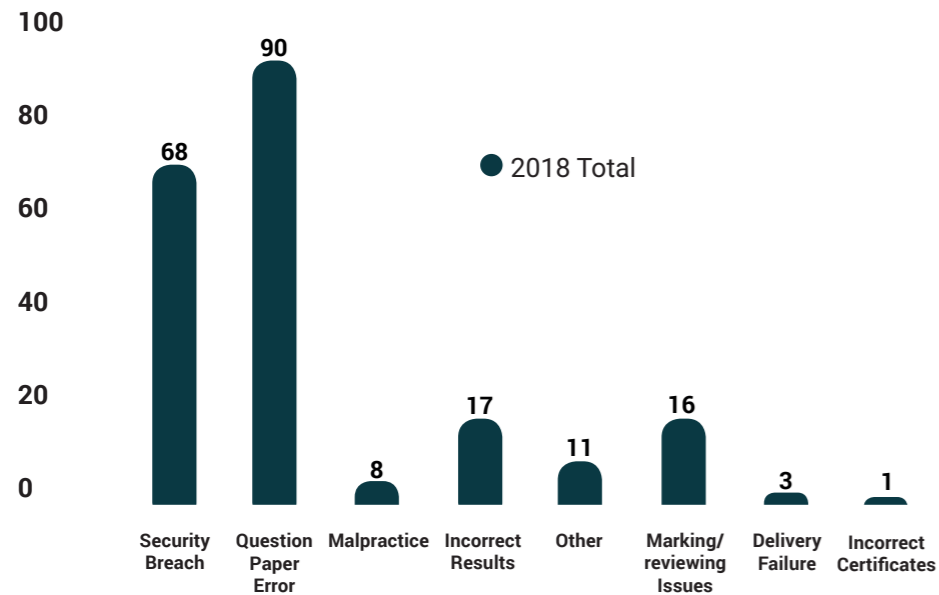
As in other years, ahead of the series, we wrote to each board to set out how we expected them to manage any issues that arose during the series. We also outlined the types of issues about which we expected to be notified.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/variability-in-gcse-results-for-schools-2016-to-2018>  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/734213/A\\_level\\_centre\\_variability\\_2016\\_to\\_2018.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/734213/A_level_centre_variability_2016_to_2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See Condition B3 of our General Conditions of Recognition for a definition of an Adverse Effect and reporting requirements: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofqual-handbook>

We want to know that exam boards manage issues quickly and effectively to minimise any impact on students and we do not expect them to wait until they have all the facts before alerting us.

### Notifications by type

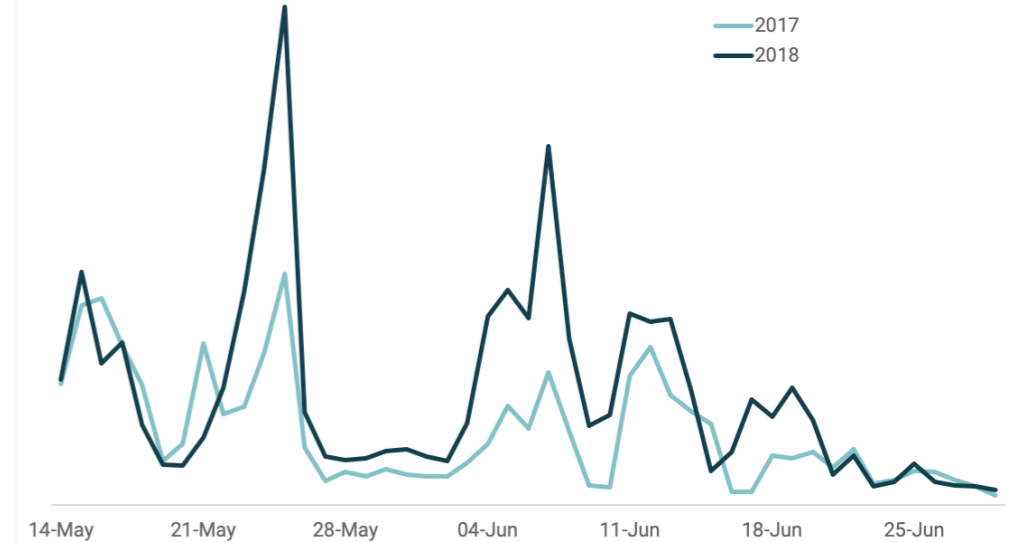


We continued our communications and public engagement campaign to help students, parents, teachers and employers understand the reforms, including the new combined science GCSE grades. We produced a range of resources, including a film<sup>3</sup>, digital postcards and presentation slide packs which were sent to every school in England, and published regular blogs<sup>4</sup>.

In recent years, we have seen increasing use of social media by students, to express their feelings about exam papers, or questions within papers. It has become common for the mainstream media to identify and highlight some of these posts. We actively monitor social media, so that we are aware of any potential areas of concern and able to act accordingly.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udKj5fjrDeA>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/>

### Social media activity\* over exam series window



\* c300 keywords

Exam boards take a similar approach. This year, as in previous years, we saw posts which we queried with the relevant exam board, but many more where we did not consider it necessary to take any action (beyond continued monitoring).

### AQA GCSE English literature

AQA reported an example of social media commentary on its GCSE English literature qualification this year.

This related to contextual information provided for an optional question on the novel *Frankenstein*. Social media reporting at the time raised concern that the context provided may have confused students.

We monitored the way AQA considered whether this had any impact on students' performance. To assure ourselves that AQA made appropriate decisions, and followed through consistently, we attended examiner training and required frequent statistical updates on how students had performed on the questions. From the data AQA provided, it did not appear there was a negative impact on students' ability to provide meaningful responses and the questions performed consistently with other optional questions on the respective papers.

## Behavioural research into malpractice

In 2018 we commissioned research into how malpractice is perceived by teachers and students, along with the most likely causes. It found that both teachers and students considered malpractice to be more likely to occur as a result of opportunity rather than being planned. The teachers and students reflected that creating resilient environments is essential to encouraging the right behaviours. We are using this research to inform our ongoing communication with schools and colleges about preventing malpractice. We focused our communications in 2018 on reinforcing the importance of the exams officer role and supporting them to create the right environment for the safe delivery of the exam series.

We wrote<sup>5</sup> to all headteachers in May to remind them about the important job their exams officers perform over the series and throughout the year. We suggested ways in which they could support their exam officers to minimise the opportunity of mistakes and malpractice arising.

We also promoted the Joint Council for Qualification's (JCQ) 2 videos about students and mobile phones<sup>6</sup> in exams and procedures for handling exam papers.



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-to-schools-summer-2018>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/malpractice/jcq-video-no-mobiles-in-exams>

## Phase 1

1.3M  
students

16.3M  
qualification entries

2,373

GCSE, AS and  
A level standard  
question papers

(England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

4,225  
discrete modified  
papers issued

## Phase 1: Exam planning

### Entries

Schools and colleges are responsible for submitting entries to the exam boards for each exam or assessment their students will take.

In May 2018 we published statistics on provisional exam entries for GCSE, AS and A level qualifications<sup>9</sup>. In summer 2018, there was a small increase in the number of students entered for GCSEs compared with 2017.

The largest increases were in EBacc subjects, particularly separate sciences (biology, chemistry and physics). Entries for all non-EBacc GCSE subjects except art and design declined in 2018.

Overall, students entered for all AS subjects fell by almost 60% from 659,880 in 2017 to 269,090 in 2018. This continues the trend seen in 2016 and 2017 and is largely because new AS qualifications are stand-alone qualifications in England (meaning students do not have to take an AS as part of a reformed A level).

Overall, students entered for all A level subjects remained broadly stable, with a slight decrease of just over 3% from 785,450 in 2017 to 759,670 in 2018.

### Adjustments to exam arrangements

Disabled students are entitled to reasonable adjustments in line with the provisions set out in the Equality Act 2010. The exam boards are required to design accessible assessments but also to make reasonable adjustments to remove or reduce the disadvantage that would otherwise be experienced by a disabled student taking their exams<sup>8</sup>, for example, to provide a modified paper so that it is in a larger font or to allow a student to have extra time in which to complete the exam. Exam boards also adjust the way exams are taken by some students who are ill or injured at the time of the exam and who, without an adjustment, would not be able properly to demonstrate their knowledge, skills or understanding in the assessment. The exam boards tend to refer to both reasonable adjustments for disabled students and to adjustments to the way assessments are undertaken by students who have an injury or illness at the time of the assessment as 'access arrangements'.

In November 2018 we published statistics on access arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels during the 2017/18 academic year<sup>9</sup>. There were 391,130 approved access arrangements, down 0.5% on 2016/17.

However, the number of approved requests for modified question papers rose again, by 4%, building on the increase of 26% seen in the previous year.

The most frequently used form of adjustment for GCSEs, AS and A levels was the provision of an extra 25% of the time allocated to students to complete the exam. The use of this form of adjustment has been increasing and rose again by 5% this year. It is right and only fair that our exam system allows disabled students to have reasonable adjustments to the way they take their assessments so they can demonstrate their knowledge, skills and understanding alongside their peers. Nonetheless, we note with concern the increase in the number of students being granted extra time. While schools and colleges should make sure their disabled students have reasonable adjustments, we consider any abuse of the system to be malpractice. We expect exam boards to identify and investigate schools and colleges that, without obvious good reason, have an unusually high number of students who are given extra time and to sanction, for malpractice, any found to be misusing these arrangements.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/entries-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2018-exam-series>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/96>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/access-arrangements-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-2017-to-2018-academic-year>

## Question paper and material errors

Exam boards typically write assessment materials for upcoming exam series, including question papers, stimulus materials, and mark schemes, a year or more before the series takes place. We require boards to produce assessment materials which are clear, appropriate and fit for purpose. In 2018, exam boards issued a total of 6,598 standard and discrete modified question papers.

Errors are rare, but where they occur they can affect students' ability to answer questions as intended; and errors in mark schemes can lead to students being awarded incorrect marks.

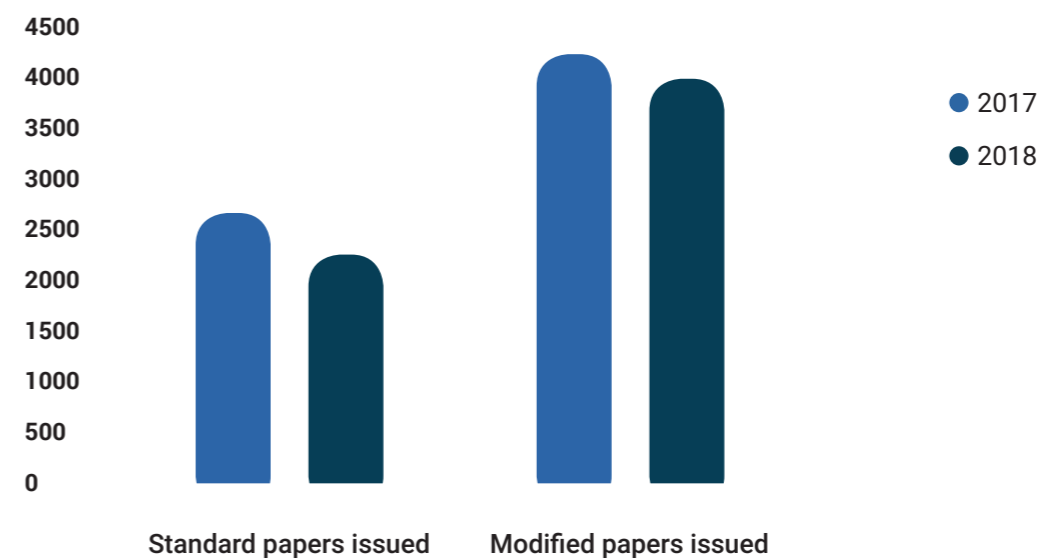
Overall, 90 errors were identified in question papers and materials in 2018. Some of these were identified before exams took place, some were identified by students or teachers during the exams, and others were identified during marking.

Exam boards use a range of measures to mitigate the effect of an error. Where possible they will replace the assessment papers or issue a correction (known as an 'erratum') ahead of the exams being taken. They issued 24 errata this summer. In the other cases, mark schemes were adjusted to take into account different possible responses, or discounted the affected question and award the mark or marks to all students. We do not consider the impact of the majority of these errors, once mitigated, to have been significant.

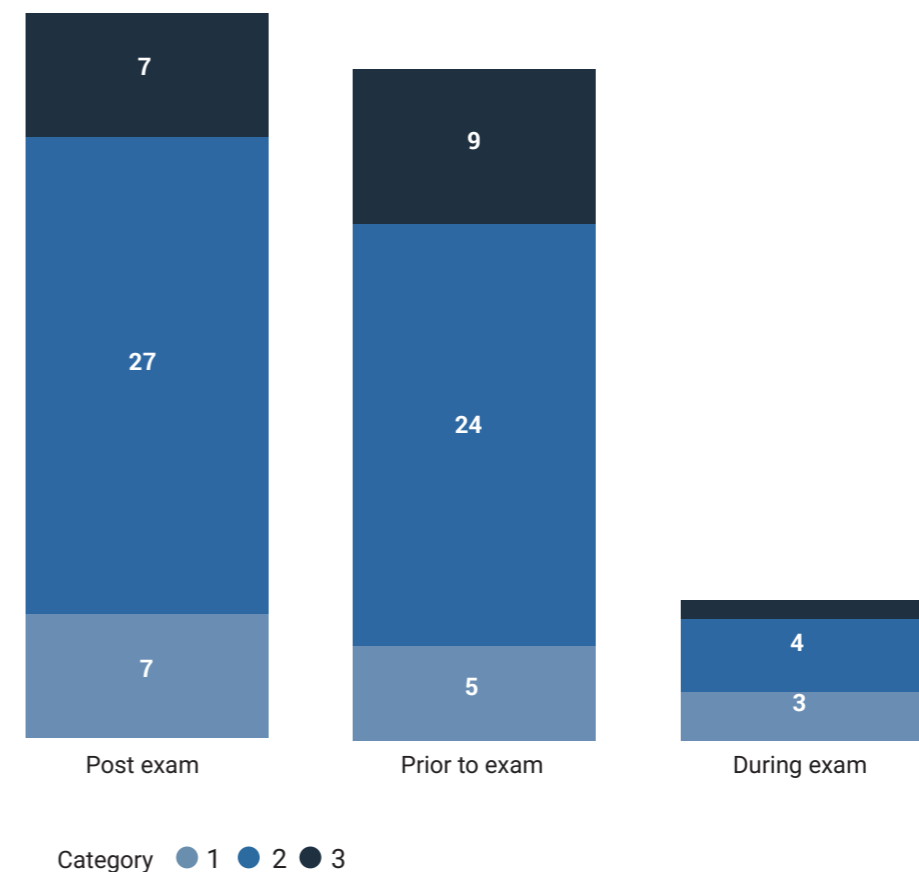
We categorise errors in both standard and modified papers by their potential level of impact before any mitigation has been applied. The categories are as follows;

<b>Category 3</b> errors which will not affect a learner's ability to generate a meaningful response to a question/task.
<b>Category 2</b> errors which could or do cause unintentional difficulties for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question/task
<b>Category 1</b> errors which could or do make it impossible for learners to generate a meaningful response to a question/task

## Number of papers issued



## When question paper error was identified, by category



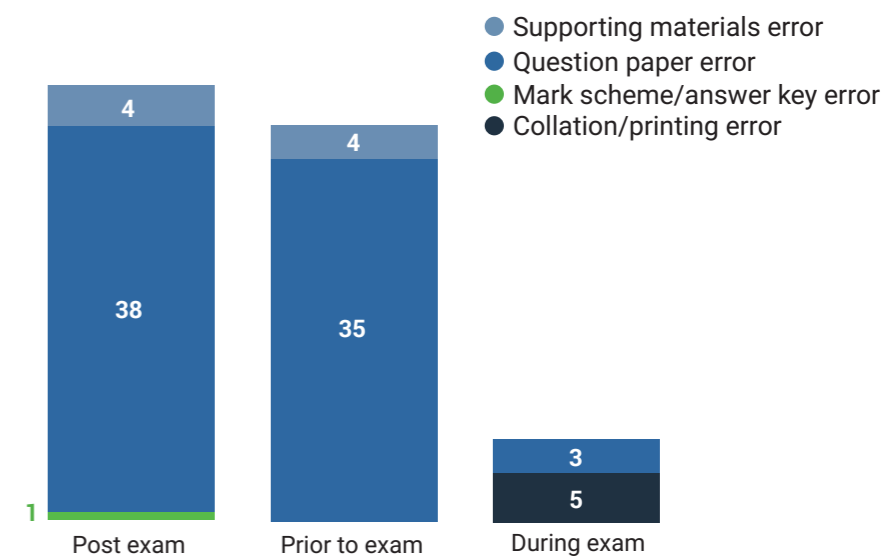
## WJEC A level French/Spanish

WJEC notified us of an error in its A level Spanish listening assessment, which had been reported by a teacher at a centre. A question number was incorrectly referenced in the audio recording, but the information on the question paper was correct.

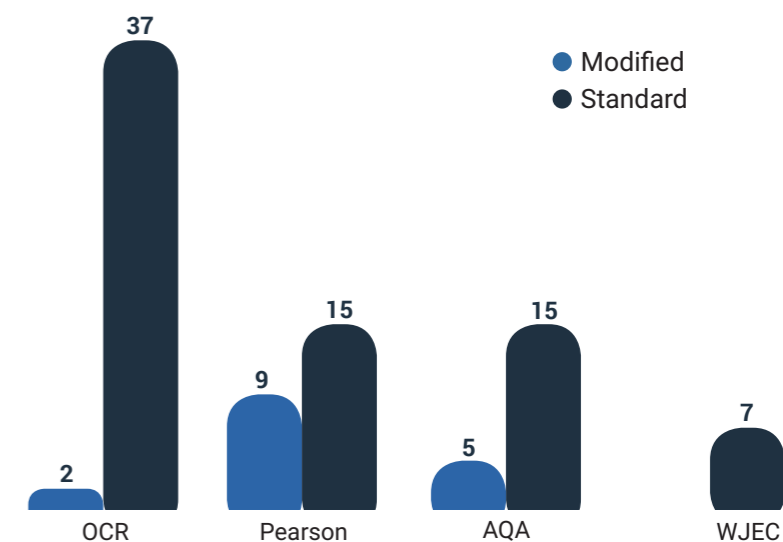
A similar error was also identified in the A level French paper. These received media coverage.

WJEC reviewed performance on each paper to identify whether any candidates appeared disadvantaged by the errors. With regard to the GCE Spanish error, WJEC found no statistical evidence to indicate that the candidates were impacted by the incorrect reference on the audio CD to the question number. With regard to the GCE French error, WJEC identified that there were some statistical anomalies in expected student performance so it calculated an estimated mark for question 4 for all candidates, based on their performance on the other items assessing the same skill (questions 1, 2 and 3). This estimated mark was compared to the actual mark achieved by the candidates on question 4. Where the estimated mark was higher than the actual mark achieved by a candidate, the higher mark was awarded to those candidates. An additional review was undertaken of the candidates' performance on the final question of the paper as some might have taken longer than anticipated to respond to question 4. This led to a higher mark being awarded to a very small number of candidates for that specific question.

## When question paper error was identified, by type



## Question paper error by paper type and exam board

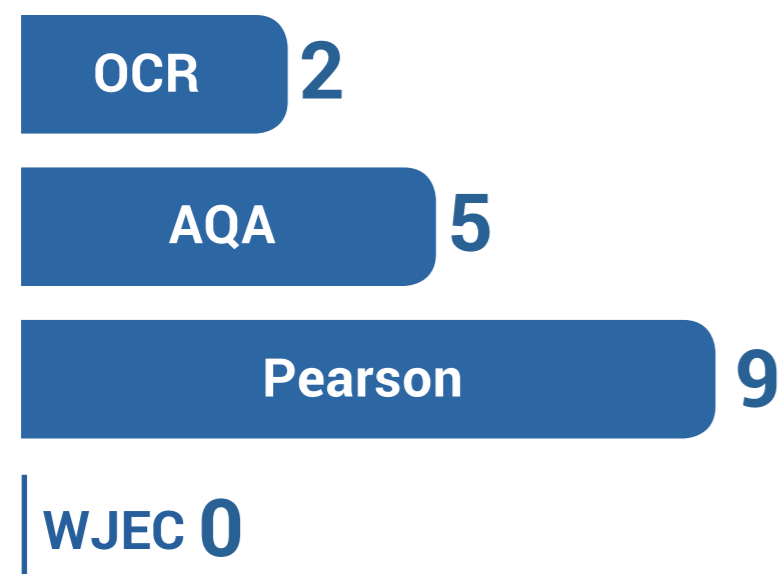




## Errors in modified papers

Exam boards also notified us about errors that appeared only in modified papers. These were introduced as part of the modification process, therefore they did not appear in the standard versions of the paper. However, they are no less significant in terms of their potential impact for the small number of students affected.

### Instances exam boards notified us about modified question paper errors



### Other errors

A small number of errors this year appeared in supporting materials or in instructions for centres/examiners, the specification or in the mark scheme.

These were not allocated an error category as they did not directly affect students' ability to generate a meaningful response.

## Pearson GCSE German – sequencing grid

A sequencing grid is provided for each tier of the German speaking paper to ensure that stimulus materials are allocated in a randomised manner and to help ensure candidates are given the opportunity to speak in relation to a variety of themes. The sequencing grid for schools and colleges to follow when allocating stimulus cards was correct. However, the sequencing references given as examples in the general instructions did not correspond with the grid. Where the teacher followed the general instructions, the candidate was offered the opportunity to speak on 3 of the 5 themes, instead of 4.

Pearson contacted all schools and colleges and identified that teachers had recognised the error and were correctly following the sequencing grid.

## OCR GCSE biology gateway science A – incorrect front cover

OCR was notified by a centre that the front cover of a GCSE biology gateway science A question paper had the wrong paper reference on it.

The error did not affect students, but there was potential for the wrong paper to be issued. OCR issued a notice to centres to inform them of the error; and contacted all schools and colleges by telephone. As far as we are aware, no school or college issued the wrong paper in this instance.

# Phase 2

# 5.9K

schools and colleges

# 1,746

GCSE, AS and A level exams

## Phase 2: Exam administration

### Security breaches

Schools and colleges receive exam papers and supporting materials some weeks before the exams are taken. They must make sure they securely store the exam paper packets and only open them immediately before the exam is taken. If a packet is opened early, the confidentiality of the materials is at risk.

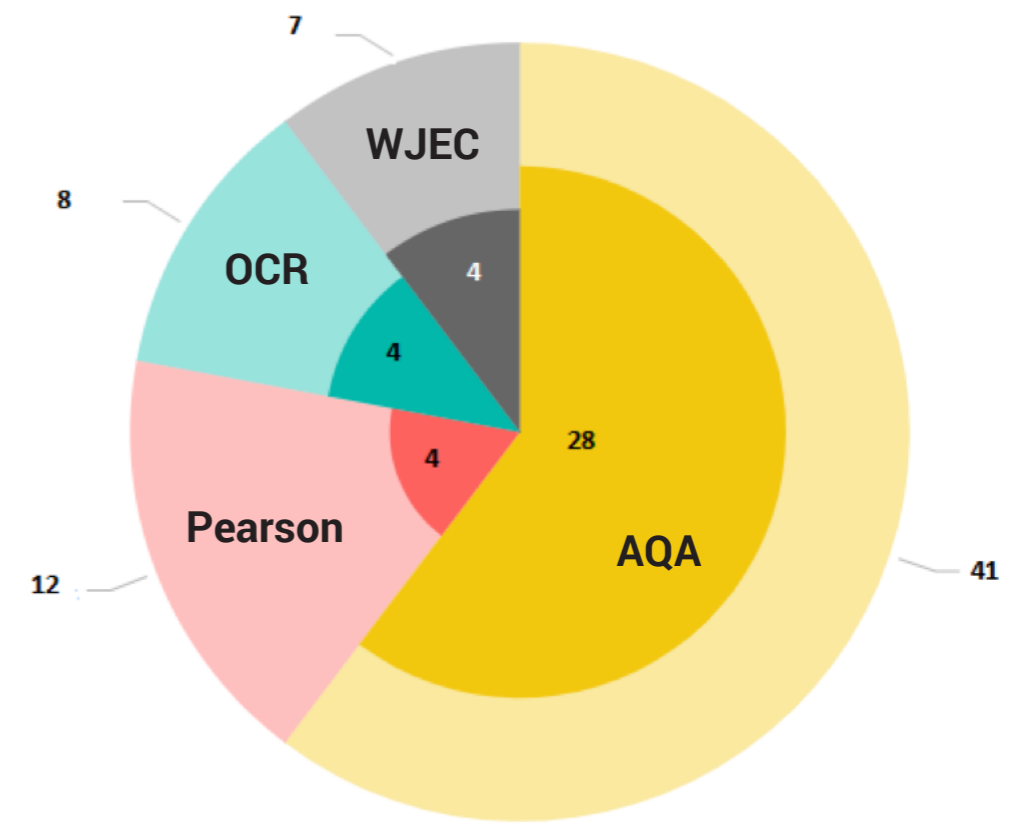
Exam boards set out how schools and colleges must store and open packets. For example, 2 people must check the packet is the correct one before it is opened. Despite this, mistakes are sometimes made. Mostly, the error is quickly spotted, but in other cases, exam papers are given out at the wrong time and/or to the wrong students.

We ask exam boards to tell us when there has been an actual security breach, as well as occasions when there was a potential for a security breach which was contained. Where a breach happens, we expect the affected exam board to investigate the extent of the breach and take all reasonable steps to mitigate its impact.

Ahead of 2018, we encouraged exam boards to take extra steps to reduce incidents where centres open (and sometimes distribute) the wrong papers. We have also been exploring how we can work better with exams officers and stakeholders to identify security procedures within centres which are ineffective or inappropriate.

Of the 68 security breaches in 2018, 40 were due to schools or colleges opening, and sometimes handing out, the wrong exam paper. The use of social media and digital messaging can mean that a security breach in one school is difficult to contain, as confidential information can be more easily disseminated.

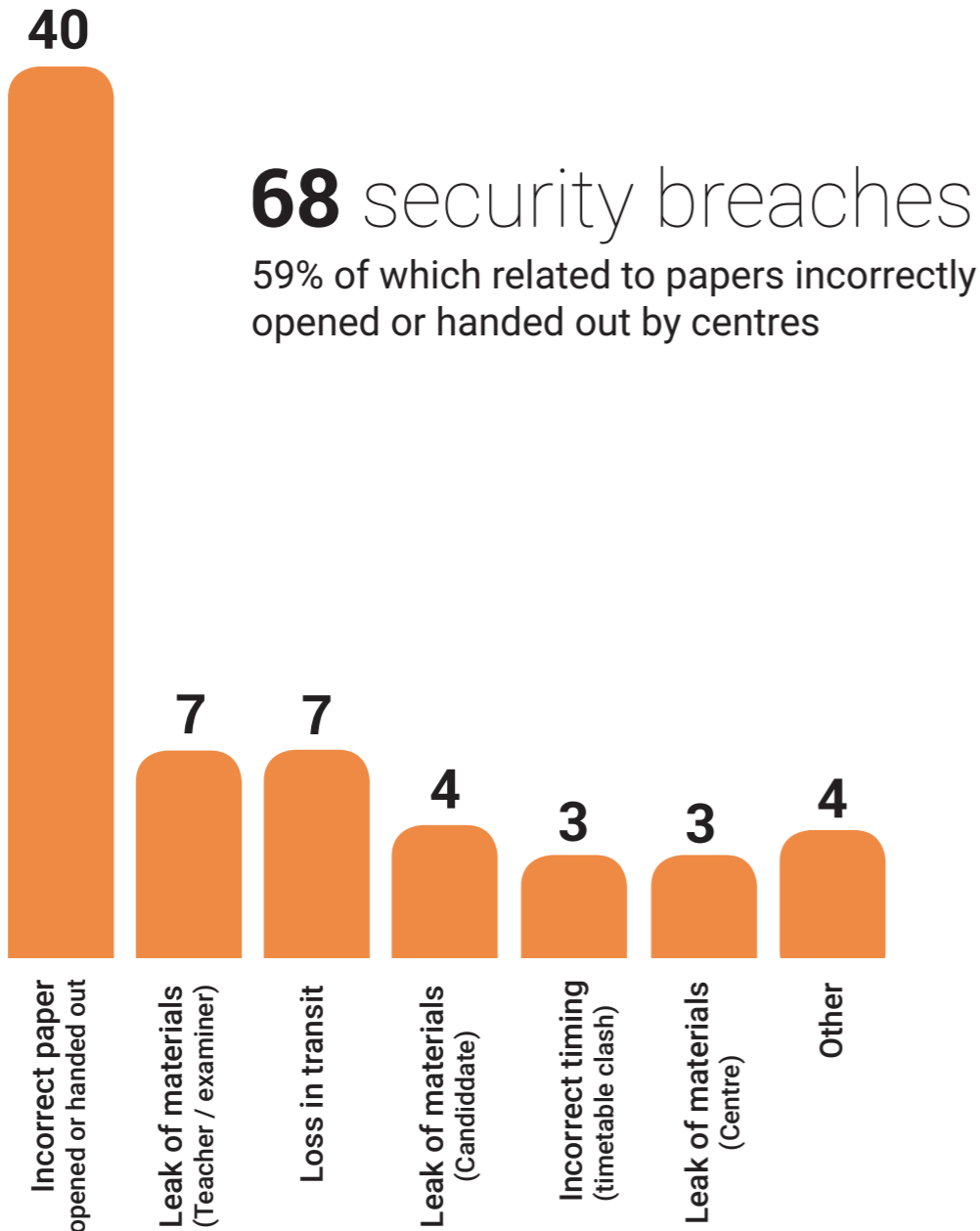
There was also a small number of instances where teachers, who were also examiners, were alleged to have disclosed information about confidential assessment material to students. Where possible, the exam boards took action to ensure the assessments were fair for all. In May 2018, we published guidance requiring exam boards, and other awarding organisations, to improve the safeguards around teacher involvement in the development of confidential assessment materials. We will monitor how exam boards are embedding such safeguards for 2019.



Nature of security breaches

Other types of security breach      Incorrect question papers handed out

● ● ● ●      ● ● ● ●



**Pearson A level mathematics breach**

In 2017 Pearson launched an investigation into allegations that the security of some of its A level mathematics papers had been breached. The police also began a criminal investigation. For 2018, Pearson introduced some additional security steps to safeguard these papers at a number of centres. Shortly before one of the papers was due to be taken, allegations of a security breach were identified and investigated. As a result of the safeguards Pearson had put in place they were able to quickly identify the likely source of the leak, and to identify candidates who may have had prior access to the materials. We monitored Pearson's ongoing investigation and subsequent sanctions placed on staff and students. We were satisfied that Pearson took appropriate steps to secure the delivery of the 2018 exam and recognised that some of the preventative steps they took had helped them to quickly contain the issue.

**AQA GCSE combined science chemistry breach**

The security of one of AQA's GCSE 9-1 combined science, chemistry papers was breached. A centre accidentally handed out the wrong chemistry paper to a small group of students. The students were not properly supervised and had access to a mobile phone. One of the students photographed sections of the paper and disseminated it via private social media. Due to the social media platform used, AQA was unable to identify the extent to which the content had been breached, it discounted a portion of that paper for all candidates. The candidate who initially shared the information was disqualified.

## Malpractice

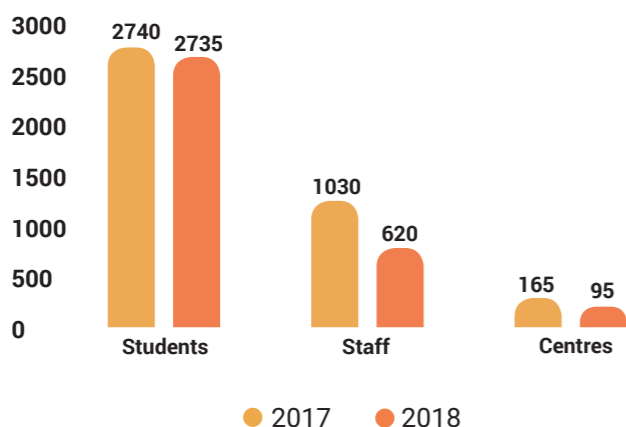
Everyone involved in the delivery of an exam has a role to play in preventing and reporting malpractice, whether they are teachers, students or examiners. We take allegations of malpractice very seriously and we expect exam boards to do the same.

Exam boards require schools and their own examiners to report all suspected incidents of malpractice and to cooperate with any subsequent investigation. Exam boards must investigate all allegations of malpractice. Where malpractice is proven, the exam board should take proportionate action against those responsible.

We do not require exam boards to report all cases of suspected malpractice while they are still under investigation. They tell us only of the most serious issues, including those that might affect a number of students and/or other awarding organisations. Once their investigations are complete, they must tell us about the total number and types of incidents that caused, or were likely to cause, an Adverse Effect. This will include cases where they have imposed sanctions. For GCSEs and A levels we collect and publish data on the number of malpractice investigations carried out by the exam boards and their outcomes, including the types of sanctions imposed by exam boards.

We published<sup>10</sup> statistics about the sanctions that exam boards imposed on students, centre staff and centres.

### Sanctions issued



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/malpractice-in-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2018-exam-series>

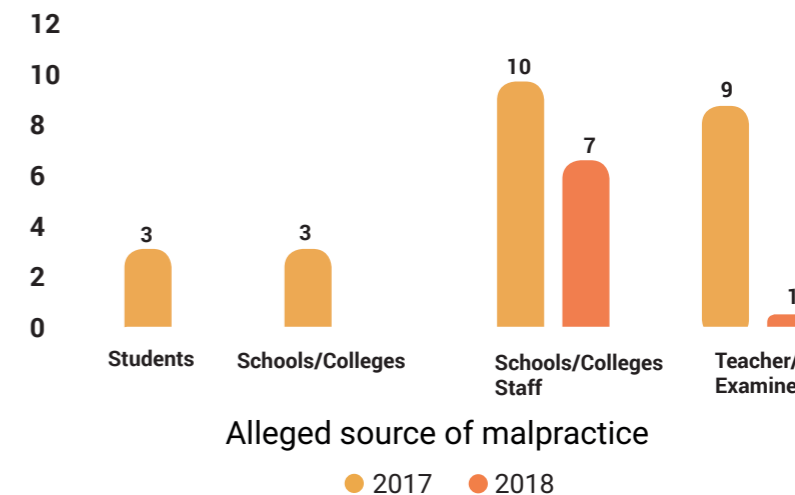
It is important to note that the reformed qualifications contain less non exam assessment than the legacy qualifications and so the opportunities for malpractice to take place have been reduced. The largest decline in types of student malpractice was seen for plagiarism. This decreased by 90% compared with 2017. However improper assistance to candidates remains the second most common offence for school or college staff. There were fewer than 5 instances of centre (school or college) malpractice in relation to improper assistance to candidates in 2018 compared to 25 in 2017.

The most common type of malpractice reported in 2018 was the introduction of unauthorised materials into the exam room, which, in most cases, was a mobile phone or other electronic communications device. This increased by 26% in 2018 compared to 2017. Mobile phones accounted for 47% of all student penalties (1,295 penalties in 2018, compared with 1,060 in 2017). The penalties imposed would have reflected the circumstances of each case.

### Exam board notifications of malpractice investigations

This summer, the exam boards notified us of 8 allegations or suspicions of malpractice under investigation, this compared to 25 notifications in 2017. As explained above, these notifications related to only the most serious concerns.

### Malpractice notifications



## Whistleblowers

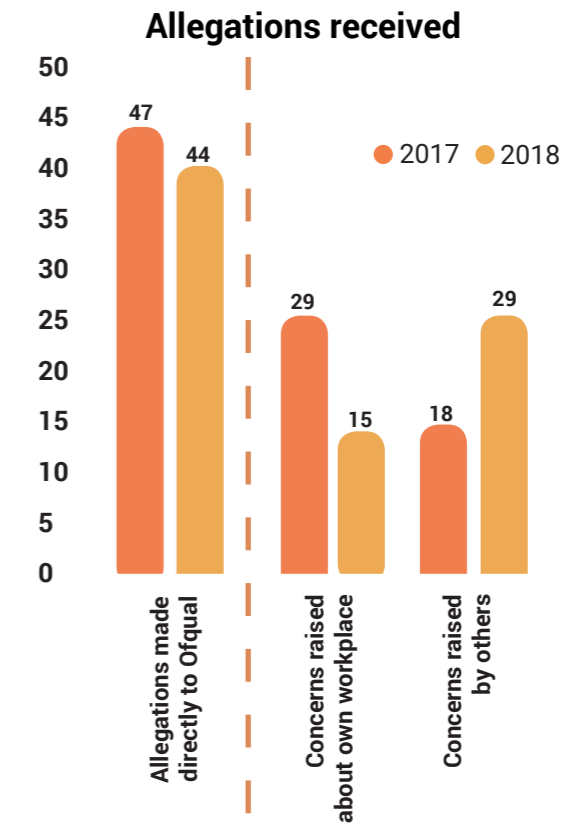
### Prescribed persons

As we are designated under the Public Interest Disclosure (Prescribed Persons) Order 2014, eligible individuals who make qualified disclosures to us are protected against unfair dismissal or detrimental treatment for blowing the whistle on wrongdoing within their workplace. We have changed our Whistleblowing Policy and accompanying procedures to make it easier to use and to clearly define our remit.

In addition to those malpractice cases reported to us by the exam boards, we also receive reports of suspected malpractice relating to schools and colleges from students, teachers, parents and others.

Anyone can tell us about concerns they have about exam or assessment-related wrongdoing. We usually share their allegations with the exam board to investigate. We do not generally provide the names of individuals where they do not wish to be identified, but we share the allegations, where doing so will not lead to their identification. When we pass allegations on to exam boards we monitor whether they take appropriate action. We follow up where necessary to assure ourselves the allegations were properly investigated and any appropriate sanctions applied. We will investigate any concerns regarding an exam board's approach.

We plan to report our whistleblowing data for April 2018 to March 2019 in our 2019 Annual Report.



Over the next year we will continue to work with key stakeholders to promote a common understanding of what constitutes malpractice and how to report concerns about malpractice and of the sanctions which can be applied.

We welcome JCQ's launch of an independent commission into malpractice and are contributing to its work.

We will continue to explore how social media monitoring can best be used to detect indicators of malpractice.

# Phase 3

# 14.7M

GCSE, AS and A level  
scripts

# 63K

examiners

(England, Wales and Northern Ireland)

# 615,295

special consideration  
requests

## Phase 3: Marking

Exam boards can mark students' scripts on paper and onscreen. Where marking is onscreen, it can be by item (an individual question or several related part questions) or at whole paper level. Marking at item level has advantages, in that many different examiners will mark part of each paper. This minimises the impact of any leniency or severity on the part of any one examiner on an individual student. For example, a student's script containing 30 different questions is likely to be marked by 30 different examiners.

Each examiner's work is quality checked by their respective exam board to ensure their marking is consistent, and to the required standard. The types of check vary, depending on whether scripts are marked on paper or electronically (onscreen), as well as whether they are marked by question or as a whole paper. If an examiner is not marking to the required standard they can be stopped from marking until they have had guidance from a more senior examiner. They might not be allowed to continue marking. If so, their scripts would be given to a different examiner.

Where marking is onscreen, checking includes 'seeds' randomly included in the items given to each examiner to mark. These 'seeds' are real student responses for which senior examiners have previously agreed a mark. Examiners do not know which items are 'seeds'.

Where scripts are marked on paper, examiners send samples of their marking to a more senior examiner for checking.



Paper  
level



Item  
level      Paper  
level

## Improving quality of marking

Ahead of each summer series we ask the exam boards about any changes they have made to their qualifications, mark schemes, training or monitoring processes to enhance their quality of marking. We use a range of information to assess how exam boards are ensuring the quality of their marking. For example, we evaluate the review of marking data, marker monitoring data, examiner surveys and produce consistency metrics. We share information and metrics<sup>11</sup> with exam boards which highlight areas where we consider there might be room for improvement.

Ahead of this summer series, each exam board told us what it was doing to enhance its overall quality of marking, and to address any particular shortcomings we had identified in its approach. We will consider the extent to which each exam board addressed these shortcomings using the marking metrics data from 2018.

### AQA

We identified that the monitoring of the most senior members of some marking teams was not as effective as we would expect. We highlighted these concerns to AQA and it assured us that it would take steps to improve its monitoring in this area.

### OCR

On analysis of the marking metrics, and following our investigation into a complaint, we identified that OCR's monitoring of its markers was not as effective we would expect as it was not giving sufficient weight to the outcomes of its seed data. OCR provided us with an undertaking<sup>12</sup> to put in place revised processes to monitor the quality of its marking in 2018.

### Pearson

We identified that Pearson was not always following its process for the selection of seed items in some subjects. Pearson set out the steps it planned to take ahead of 2018 to address this issue and confirmed that its subject teams were operating as expected.

### WJEC

WJEC told us that it planned to move away from using seed items to monitor its GCSE English literature markers. We told WJEC that where the marking method allows for seeding scripts, this is always considered to be a better monitoring tool than backreading. WJEC reconsidered its approach and reinstated the use of seed items for this qualification.

We continue to monitor exam boards' improvements in this area and will continue our work to monitor quality of marking and to identify any room for improvement.

## Marking progress

Exam boards must notify us if they believe there are factors which might affect their ability to issue results accurately and on time. This year, we asked the exam boards to give us advance notice of concerns they had about marking progress.

One exam board alerted us to potential delays in relation to the marking of a number of components. However, the delays were rectified such that they did not affect the completion of marking. This is a similar picture to progress in 2016 and 2017, when we were notified of potential delays in some components (which were also resolved before awarding).

## Adjustments to marks

Exam boards can adjust the marks a student has been given to compensate for their absence from an exam or to take account of issues that had an impact on their performance in an exam. In both cases, the student must have been affected by an event outside of their control, such as illness, injury or bereavement at the time of the assessment. This is a form of special consideration.

Where a student is absent from an exam for a reason beyond their control, the exam board will determine the grade for the qualification based on the student's performance in their other assessments for the subject. GCSE and A level exam boards refer to this as an 'assessed grade' or a 'calculated grade'. The exam boards normally require a student to have taken at least 25% of the overall assessments for the qualification before they will award an assessed/calculated grade.

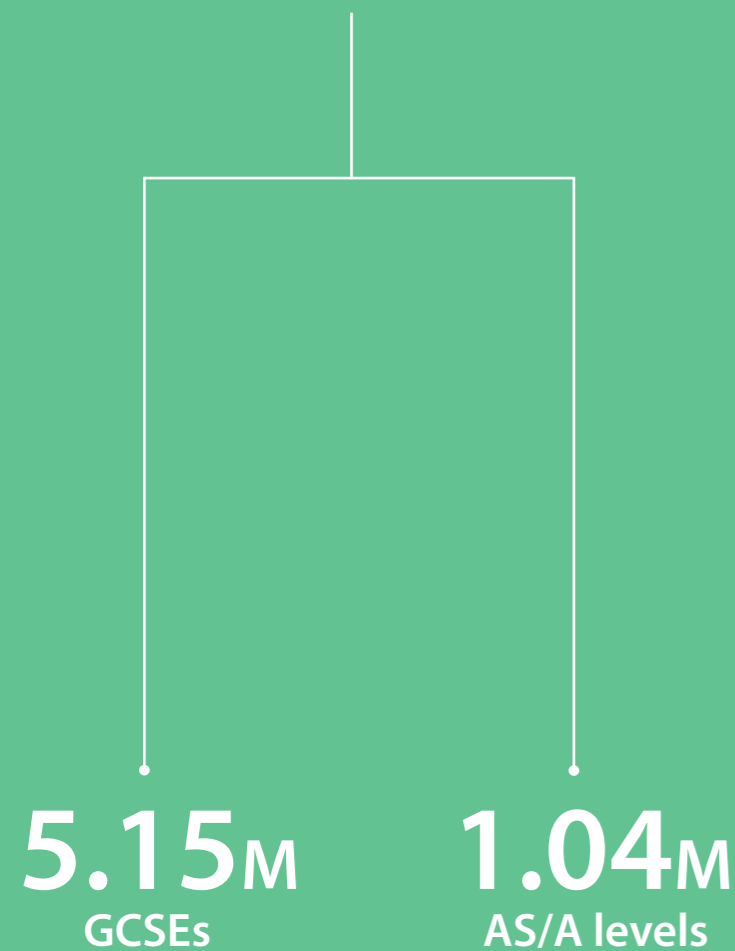
We have separately published statistics about special consideration in GCSEs, AS and A levels. In total, there were 615,295 special consideration requests, up 1% from 2017. The number of requests has remained broadly similar to last year. However, the number of requests approved as a proportion of the total number of assessments taken has increased slightly (from 3.1% in 2017 to 3.5% in 2018). The most frequent mark adjustment in 2018 was 2% of the maximum mark, whereas last year it was 3%.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/markings-roundtable-2018>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ocr-undertaking-marking-arrangements-conditions-august-2018>

# Phase 4

**6.19M**  
certificates issued



## Phase 4: Setting and maintaining standards

### GCSE, AS and A level standard setting

We closely monitor standard setting in GCSEs, AS and A levels. We expect very close comparability of grade standards between different exam boards and between different specifications in any one subject.<sup>13</sup>

Before results are issued, exam boards send us data from their GCSE, AS and A level awards, detailing the results against statistical predictions of the proportions of students likely to achieve the key grades.

Our aims in this monitoring are to:

- maintain standards year on year
- align standards across exam boards in a subject
- secure public confidence in the results being issued

We expect exam boards' outcomes to be close to predictions, unless they can provide evidence to justify different outcomes. We set reporting tolerances to be used, based on the number of students entered for a qualification. For example, for qualifications with more than 3,000 students about whom we know their prior attainment, exam boards must report and provide evidence to justify any outcomes that are more than one percentage point away from the prediction. For smaller entry qualifications, the reporting tolerances are wider.

When qualifications change, it is more difficult for senior examiners to judge the quality of student work – in general, students in the first cohorts are likely to perform less well than their predecessors, because teachers are less familiar with the new qualifications and there are fewer past papers and other support materials available.

We did not set reporting tolerances for the reformed qualifications in the first 2 years that they were awarded. We agreed with the exam boards that they would carry forward standards in new qualifications using statistics.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/764153/Inter\\_board\\_comparability\\_-\\_FINAL6461.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764153/Inter_board_comparability_-_FINAL6461.pdf)



- In the new AS and A levels, this meant using predictions so that, in general, a student who would have achieved a grade A in the previous qualifications would achieve a grade A this summer.
- In the new GCSEs graded 9 to 1, this meant using predictions so that the proportions achieving grades 7, 4 and 1 were anchored to the proportions achieving grades A, C and G in the legacy qualifications.

In the first 2 years of the new qualifications, we expected exam boards to set grade boundaries to get as close as possible to predictions, unless they had strong evidence to support an alternative boundary mark.

In August, we published<sup>14</sup> a summary of our monitoring work, which included details of the way in which we monitored the new GCSE and A level awards in England, details of the number of awards and those that were outside the reporting tolerances or, for reformed qualifications, did not get as close as possible to predictions.

### GCSE combined science

The new GCSE in combined science was awarded for the first time in summer 2018. This is a double GCSE and, to reflect the size, there is a 17-point grade scale, from 9-9, 9-8, 8-8 through to 2-1, 1-1. It is a tiered qualification. In July 2018, exam boards alerted us to relatively high numbers of students on course to receive unclassified results on higher tier combined science GCSE, because they had not achieved enough marks for the 'safety net' grade 4-3. Following detailed discussions with the exam boards, and analysis of the data, we concluded that some students who had been entered for higher tier would have been more appropriately entered for foundation tier papers.

In August, we considered the options available and concluded that it would not be fair to higher tier students to miss out on grades they could have achieved if they had been entered for the foundation tier. We estimated this would have affected around 9,000 students in England. We wrote to exam boards to inform them that, for 2018, we would be open to them awarding a grade 3-3 on higher tier and we explained the situation in a blog<sup>15</sup> shortly before results day. Not all schools were affected by this, and fewer than a third of schools had higher tier students who received a grade 3-3. Since results were issued, exam boards have contacted those centres to advise them about tier entry in 2019. We will also be encouraging schools and colleges to make appropriate entry decisions.

<sup>14</sup>[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/735729/Summer\\_2018\\_monitoring\\_summary\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/735729/Summer_2018_monitoring_summary_-_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>15</sup><https://ofqual.blog.gov.uk/2018/08/20/gcse-results-day-what-to-expect/>



# Phase 5

## Phase 5: Post results

### Incorrect results

We expect exam boards to mark all assessments accurately and to issue results which reflect the performance of each student. An incorrect result could occur as a result of a processing error, from incorrect adding up of marks, or a marker's unreasonable exercise of academic judgement. We take the issue of incorrect results, regardless of their cause, very seriously. The numbers of incorrect results arising from marking or moderation errors and identified through a review of marking or moderation are reported separately as part of our publication on the review of marking and moderation statistics.

### Processing errors

Exam boards can also identify processing errors while dealing with review of marking requests, carrying out internal reviews, or responding to complaints. They must notify us when they have issued incorrect results because of these errors.

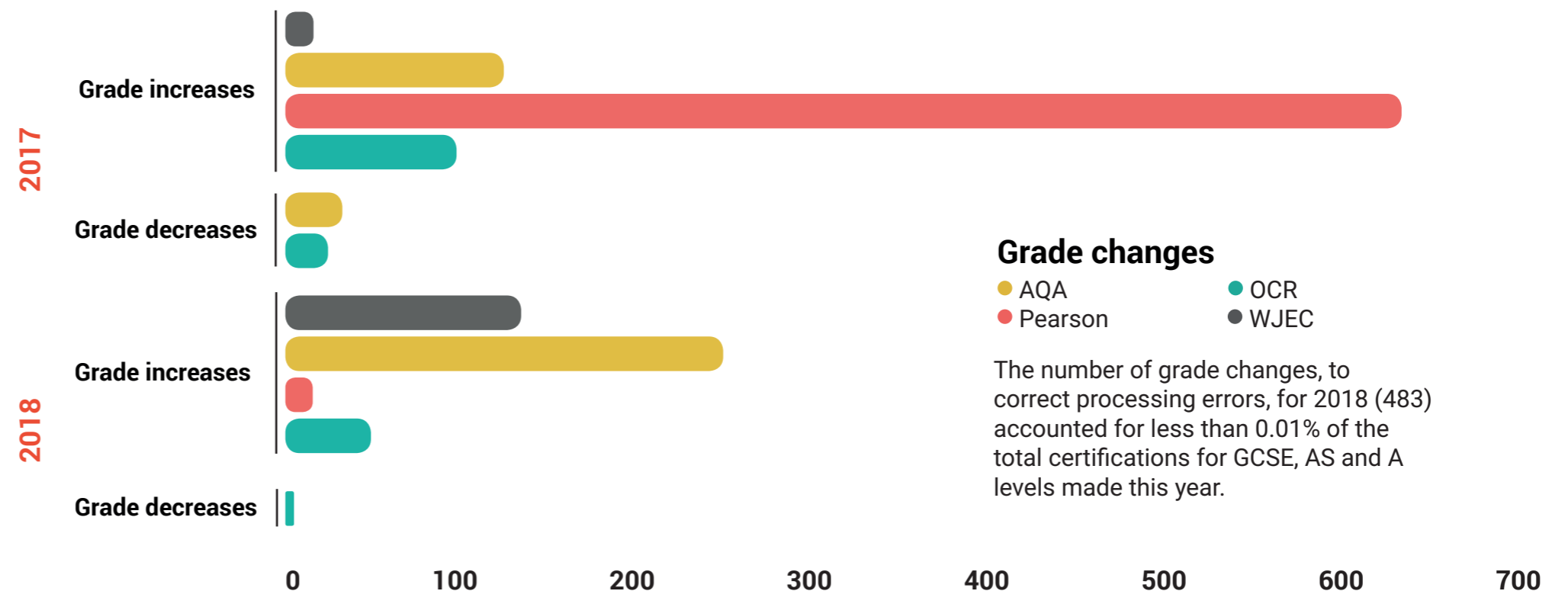
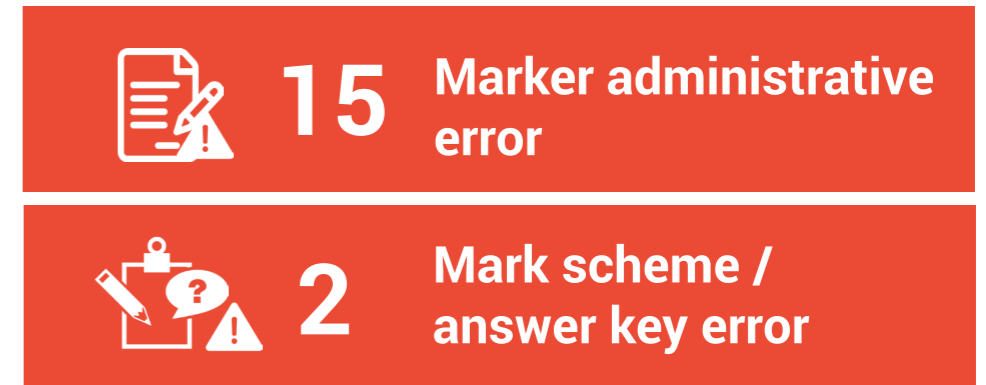
The processing errors, about which we were notified, largely occurred while the exam boards were applying mark adjustments for special consideration or while students' marks were being recorded (administrative errors). We will be considering the steps the exam boards take to reduce the risks that incorrect results are issued because of processing errors of this type.

### Incorrect results: cause of processing errors\*



\*cause of 3 instances of incorrect results issued to be determined

### Incorrect results: type of processing error made



#### Grade changes

- AQA
- OCR
- Pearson
- WJEC

The number of grade changes, to correct processing errors, for 2018 (483) accounted for less than 0.01% of the total certifications for GCSE, AS and A levels made this year.

## Reviews of marking and moderation

In August 2016, we put in place new rules for reviews of marking and moderation and for appeals, so that the focus is on correcting marking errors. Marks should not be changed for any other reason.

We require each exam board to ensure that its marking reflects the performance demonstrated by a student and that its markers apply the mark scheme consistently. However, in subjects such as English, it will often be the case that 2 markers, exercising their academic judgment reasonably and without making any mistake, would award different marks to the same student's answer. Both of these marks are legitimate.

If a school or college is concerned that there has been an error in the original marking then they can ask for that marking to be reviewed. Our rules require an exam board to review the original marking to identify if a marking error has occurred, but the paper is not marked again (remarked). Where the exam board identifies a marking error it is required to correct the error (marks may go up or down). However, a reasonable mark should not be changed. The majority of marking errors will be as a result of a one-off mistake or administrative error. However, if an exam board discovers, as a result of a review or by any other means, that there has been a failure in its assessment process (for example, that a particular marker was consistently not marking in line with expectations) then we require the exam board to correct or mitigate the effect of that failure.

Following an analysis of reviews undertaken in 2017, we identified variations in the exam boards' efforts to embed the revised rules for reviews. This was unsatisfactory as we changed our rules, in 2016, in order to create a more level playing field, so that those students who put in for a review do not gain an advantage over those who do not. We expect the exam boards to follow our rules and we have taken action where they did not.

### AQA review of marking undertaking – November 2017

We identified particular issues with how AQA had conducted its reviews in summer 2017. As a result, AQA gave us an undertaking<sup>16</sup> ahead of the November 2017 review of marking period and we monitored how it conducted those reviews. It was able to demonstrate that it had tightened its processes for the November series. We have monitored the extent to which it was able to embed these improvements across all reviews for summer 2018 and will seek further assurances ahead of forthcoming exam series.

### OCR review of marking undertaking – summer 2018

We identified issues with how OCR was monitoring its reviews of marking in 2017. OCR told us that it could not implement the IT changes it deemed necessary to address this before 2020. However, OCR gave us an undertaking<sup>17</sup> setting out additional monitoring it would put in place for summer 2018. It also introduced some manual processes to enable it to act on any issues it identified as a result. We will consider OCR's analysis of the effectiveness of these measures.

### Summer 2018 outcomes

We have published<sup>18</sup> official statistics on reviews of marking and moderation in GCSEs, AS and A levels for summer 2018. This shows that 63% of GCSE and GCE reviews this summer resulted in no unit mark change, this has increased from 55% in 2017.

At GCSE, 442,540 reviews were requested, an increase of 4% from 2017 (425,075 reviews). At GCE 89,060 reviews were requested, a drop of 7% from 2017 (95,845 reviews). This reflects changes in entries which are down 25% at GCE, mainly due to a drop in the number of AS entries.

In 21 out of 35 GCSE subjects, the percentage of qualification grades that were challenged was lower in 2018 compared to 2017. In 18 out of 35 GCSE subjects the percentage of qualification grades changed was higher in 2018 compared to 2017. In 23 out of 33 GCE subjects, the percentage of qualification grades that were challenged was higher in 2018 compared to 2017. In 22 out of 33 GCE subjects the percentage of qualification grades changed was higher in 2018 compared to 2017.

We have published<sup>19</sup> further details of grade changes of 2 or more grades. This shows that in 2018 the number of qualifications with a grade change of 2 or more grades (1,664 qualifications) decreased compared to 2017 (1,969 qualifications).

It would appear that the action we, and exam boards, took to ensure that the review of marking process was properly embedded for the 2018 summer exam series has been largely reflected in the 2018 outcomes. However we will continue to monitor that exam boards are conducting reviews in line with our rules; correcting errors where they are identified but not changing marks unnecessarily. More GCSE grades were changed this year than last, following a review of moderation. This suggests either that there was an issue with the original standard of marking, the moderation or the review process. We will conduct a review of those subjects where there was a particular pattern of grade changes following requests for a review of marking or moderation.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/aqa-undertaking-december-2017>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ocr-undertaking-review-of-marking-conditions-august-2018>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reviews-of-marking-and-moderation-for-gcse-as-and-a-level-summer-2018-exam-series>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/764159/RoM\\_2\\_grades\\_-\\_FI-NAL6462.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/764159/RoM_2_grades_-_FI-NAL6462.pdf)

## Conclusion and next steps

The 2018 exam series was successfully delivered; 94 reformed qualifications were awarded, with marking completed and results announced on time. 6.2 million certificates were awarded to 1.3 million students. We are now looking ahead to next summer.

In November, we held a webinar<sup>20</sup> for exams officers, and others involved with delivering exams, to support them to continue delivering safe exam series. We plan to release 2 videos in 2019: one aimed at students and one aimed at staff in schools and colleges. We will write again to head teachers ahead of the summer and consider what information and materials we can provide to encourage colleagues to support their exams officer in achieving a successful exam series.

We welcome JCQ's formation of an independent malpractice commission and will continue our discussions with exam boards and other stakeholders on deterring, preventing, identifying, investigating and sanctioning malpractice.

We are awaiting the outcomes of exam boards' own investigations into some specific events. These will inform our response to these matters.

We have raised concerns with exam boards about a number of issues that we have noted this summer and asked them to tell us what steps they are putting in place to reduce the risks of such incidents occurring in future. These include:

- the use and content of erratum notices
- ensuring 2 people are present when opening papers
- instructions they might issue to ensure any potential security breach is effectively contained
- how they might better coordinate their packaging and dispatch dates

Our analysis of the exam series has informed our rolling programme of monitoring, audits and technical evaluations which will include a review of:

- the summer 2018 assessment materials for reformed GCSE and A level qualifications awarded for the first time this summer, to identify any aspects of our regulatory requirements which have not worked as we had intended
- optionality and predictability in reformed qualifications
- how exam boards are using their assessment strategies in the ongoing delivery of their qualifications
- the extent to which exam boards have fully embedded improvements in their quality of marking and reviews of marking
- those subjects where there is a particular pattern of grade changes following requests for a review or marking or moderation
- exam boards' investigation and management of malpractice allegations
- the extent to which exam boards have made improvements to their safeguards around teacher involvement in the development of confidential assessment materials.

We will use the findings to inform action we might require the exam boards to take to reduce any risks to the safe delivery and awarding of qualifications next year.

As we did in 2018, we plan to review the GCSE, AS and A level exam boards' readiness for the challenges and risks identified for examinations in 2019. We also continue to strengthen our understanding of the most effective methods to protect confidential assessment materials from cyber-attack and other forms of security breach.

We wish to make our publications widely accessible. Please contact us at [publications@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:publications@ofqual.gov.uk) if you have any specific accessibility requirements.

<sup>20</sup>[https://www.gov.uk/government/news/supporting-exams-officers?utm\\_source=192fc35f-e115-4421-aaa7-5e483809dd0f&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_content=immediate](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/supporting-exams-officers?utm_source=192fc35f-e115-4421-aaa7-5e483809dd0f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate)



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