



23 January 2020

For the attention of heads of science

Dear Head of Science,

GCSE combined science in summer 2020

Ahead of the entry deadline for the summer 2020 exams, I would like to remind you of the [advice we have previously given](#) about making appropriate tier entries for your students. This applies to GCSEs in separate sciences (biology, chemistry, physics) and combined science (as well as to maths and modern foreign languages).

In 2019, just under 4,500 students were ungraded on higher tier combined science, out of a total entry of over 140,000. This is significantly fewer than the 11,000 students that would have been ungraded in summer 2018 if no action had been taken, but it is still a relatively high number, so we hope you will give this careful consideration.

In combined science, the available grades are 9-9 to 4-4, with a 'safety net' grade 4-3. Higher tier students who just miss a grade 4-4 will be awarded a grade 4-3; this 'safety net' grade is intentionally narrower, and is set at half a grade width. Students below this safety net grade will receive an unclassified result (U). We therefore recommend that students who are expected to achieve a grade 4-4 or 5-4 should be entered for foundation tier.

Similarly, for students taking one or more separate sciences, the lowest grade available on higher tier is grade 4, with a narrow 'safety net' grade 3 for those who just miss a grade 4. Students below this safety net grade will receive an unclassified result (U).

We have produced [films](#), [postcards](#) and [other resources](#) to explain how the grading scale in GCSE combined science works, which you may wish to use when explaining tiering to students and their parents/guardians.

I can reassure you that a grade 5-5 gained on the foundation tier is the same as a grade 5-5 gained on the higher tier, and this is also the case for grade 4-4. Exam boards are required to make sure that it is no easier or more difficult to achieve a grade 5-5, 5-4 or 4-4 on higher or foundation tier. There is nothing on certificates that details the tier of entry.

For summer 2020, the same arrangements will apply as in summer 2019, in that the exception we made in 2018 to allow an additional safety net grade 3-3 in combined science will not apply.

Previously, we have been aware that some membership organisations recommended the higher tier entry for students who are predicted to achieve around

grade 4-4 (or grade 4 in separate sciences). I would caution you against following that advice, as those students are at risk of missing out on two GCSE grades if they do not perform as well as expected. We recommend that students who are expected to achieve a grade 4-4 or 5-4 should be entered for foundation tier.

Please [visit our blog](#) for more information about GCSE tiering decisions for summer 2020 and feel free to use any of this material in your communications to parents/guardians. And do get in touch with your exam board if you need more specific advice.

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 the name.

Sally Collier
Chief Regulator, Ofqual